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Latinidad in the College Union: Perspectives of Latinx Staff Members

By

Naomi Rodriguez

A THESIS

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# Latinidad in the College Union: Perspectives of Latinx Staff Members

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University of Nebraska, 2019

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Latinx students represent a consistently growing and significant population of college going students, though rates for successful graduation vary greatly (Nichols, 2017). Theories of student persistence indicate that student who are actively involved in their college campuses and develop a sense of sense of belonging are likelier to persist to graduation (Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Tinto, 1975). While research seeks to understand how Latinx navigate and succeed in post-secondary environments, barriers continue to pervade in their cumulative environments (Franklin, 2016; Friesen, 2018; Gloria, Delgado-Guerrero, Salazar, Nieves, Mejia & Martinez, 2016). College unions, as a functional part of the college environment, explain their purpose as a central point of community building and inclusion (Butts et al., 2012; Rullman & Harrington, 2014). However, empirical knowledge focused specifically on confirming college union environments as positive support systems for Latinx identities is relatively non-existent (Barrett, 2014; Smith, 2019).

Using a qualitative, narrative mode of inquiry (Clandinin & Connelly, 1990; Clandinin, 2013; Kim, 2016) framed by the culturally engaging campus model (Museus, 2014), this research consisted of four current student affairs, Latinx identifying participants who revealed perspectives of support for Latinx students in the broad college campus environment and specifically within college unions. Two primary themes arose

from the data: *seeking community in the college environment* and *the college union as a meeting place or a meaning place* with relevant subthemes. Using these themes, a composite fictional narrative was created based on the perspectives of the participants. A model displaying the socialization of community building by Latinx students is also presented.

## **Dedication**

To God and to my family, Jorge, Lilian and Diana Rodriguez.

## **Acknowledgements**

This would not have been possible without Dr. Bondi. Thank you for getting me through this process and the multiple speed bumps I hit along the way.

To the participants, thank you so much for your vulnerability and authenticity. Your stories truly made the difference in this experience – I hope that your insights can reflect the change you all spoke so passionately about as you continue your work to support students.

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## **Chapter 1**

### **Introduction**

Since the 1960s, Latinx presence in higher education has increased through a variety of social (MacDonald, Botti, & Clark, 2007) and legislative acts (Thomas & Brady, 2005). This demographic serves as a vital part of the racial diversification of the collegiate communities today. While it is positive to see enrollment increasing (Crisp, Taggart, & Nora, 2015), degree attainment has not increased at similar rates. A 2018 report by Excelencia in Education calculated that Latinos were the second-largest degree earning group but still lag in completion rates behind white counterparts, with 46% averaging six years to complete an associate's or bachelor's degree (Santiago, Laurel, Martinez, Bonilla, & Labandera, 2019). Across the nation, successful graduation of this population varies even amongst institutions of similar classification, location, and other relevant characteristics (Nichols, 2017). These significant disparities in degree attainment indicate that despite increased enrollments, Latinx students are experiencing widely different collegiate environments that are affecting their ability to persist to degree attainment.

There is an array of academic programs, services and an increased importance on training staff and faculty who work to benefit Latinx students on college campuses. Emphasis has been achieved at some institutions through their designation as a Hispanic Serving Institutions (HSIs), though programs can exist at institutions nationwide. However, many initiatives aimed at supporting Latinx students are rooted in deficit ideology-- that Latinx students are simply underprepared for college-level courses and

lack the academic skills and discipline to succeed (Gandara, 2015). This deficit perspective ignores pervasive issues within campus culture, due to their history as elite institutions for a dominant majority. The campus climate, built on the values of the dominant majority, impedes Latinx students and other persons of color who do not share the vocabulary or have experience navigating similar institutions (Ponjuan, Palomin, & Calise, 2015). Key student development research, including Tinto's (1975) theory of student departure and Hurtado and Carter's (1997) exploration of sense of belonging, articulated that students were more likely to graduate when they were actively involved throughout their college experiences contributing to a high sense of belonging. Through this type of inquiry, the culturally engaging campus environment (CECE) model (Museus, 2014) was developed to analyze how institutions provide culturally validating experiences to assist in successful student outcomes like graduation.

College unions have a strong history connected to the idea of providing opportunities for student engagement, integrating educational, social, and culturally meaningful programs and services and seeking to develop a widespread sense of belonging amongst the college community (ACUI, n.d). This history has contributed to understanding it as a symbolic force, in that by talking about "unions" it may seem as if they themselves are a living entity in the campus environment. This is only partly true, as the true living force within college unions is made up of those figures whose collective interest in the space direct its function and ability to influence the surrounding college environment. Therefore, in this paper, I suggest that the union is a living entity. as college unions are highly touted centers of campus community, the question arises about how and



in what ways is the college union seen as a place of community in the lived experiences of Latinx identifying individuals. To date, research analyzes the importance of college unions as a community builder in the campus environment – yet there is a marked lack of insight from minoritized populations, such as Latinx people (Barrett, 2014). Through the lens of the CECE model, this research is to explore what are Latinx student affairs professionals' experience in college and how do they perceive the college union as a space and resource for Latinx students. Utilizing narrative inquiry, the combined insight of their undergraduate experiences with college unions, in addition to their perspectives as current student affairs professionals in college unions – provides an inside look at the effects of the campus environment, with a focus on college unions, on Latinx populations. By shifting the narrative focus towards members of this significant college demographic, the results identify ways in which college unions benefit this population and how they can improve.

### **Purpose Statement**

The purpose of this study is to explore Latinx student affairs professionals' experiences in college and how they perceive the college union as a space and resource for Latinx students. Emphasized in college union work (ACUI, n.d.) is the importance of a supportive and culturally inclusive environment, though this topic remains critically under-researched in this specialized area of student affairs work (Barrett, 2014). By extension, there is little research exploring how Latinx use and integrate into community spaces provided in college union spaces. This study seeks to bring the Latinx perspective for thoughtful consideration and as a source of information to strengthen college unions

as a culturally engaging and validating environment. It utilizes the insights of Latinx student affairs professionals to understand inter-community experiences outside of and within college unions, to reveal insight into how Latinx students perceive the experience of college unions. At the conclusion, recommendations based on the data is presented to further these goals.

### **Significance of Study**

As previously stated in the introduction, there is a wide array of academic programs and services that have been established to support Latinx students on college campuses. However, exploration of Latina/o student involvement in extracurriculars has remained generally under researched, though generally such actions are accepted as positively correlating with successful student outcomes and satisfaction in colleges (Montelongo, 2003). Staff within college unions emphasize these spaces as a central part of the college environment, with strategic initiatives to increase diversity awareness in their function as a central gathering point of the institution. However, specific research focusing on college unions and their impact on people with minoritized identities is missing from the general literature (Barrett, 2014).

The purpose of this study is to narratively explore what are Latinx student affairs professionals' experience in college and how do they perceive the college union as a space and resource for Latinx students. Connelly and Clandinin (1990) defined narrative inquiry as the mixing of the participants' and the researchers' perspectives that produce a constructed understanding of lived experiences. Kim (2016) further explained the importance of narrative inquiry, not merely as a means of storytelling but as challenging

dominant narratives that unchecked can produce educational outcomes that benefit a single ideology. As a means to achieve a meaningful outcome, narrative inquiry becomes only the general context of the inquiry that must be balanced with an underlying theory to shape what type of narrative results emerge through the story (Kim, 2016). This type of deep consideration and inquiry into college unions is vital as they promote diversification and acceptance of all identities on college campuses.

This research uses the narrative approach to study how Latinx student affairs professionals experience college unions and find meaning in their thoughtful reflection of areas of support and inclusion in the campus environment, in particular the college union (Selvi, 2008). Participants told stories that relate to their time as students and as professionals working with students in college unions, and they were asked how these environments offered a sense of support for Latinx students and professionals. I collated participants' stories to build a picture of how the college union contributed to their sense of support and belonging. Participants' narratives were split in development of an initial field text with two sections, student and professional, with overarching themes significant of each, to understand specific times as well as places in their narrative. During the data analysis process, the CECE model was a reference tool for cultural responsiveness in college unions to examine the student union as a cultural space that was both engaging and not engaging at various times and in various spaces. Examination of the initial and interim field texts highlighted commonalities of types of relationships amongst places, persons and actions. The final crafted composite story utilized the themes from the data.

Current Latinx higher education professionals, with less than ten years' experience, were chosen because they bring their perspective as a figure in the administration of college life but can also recall details of their recent history as a former student. For example, participants remembered the first time in their undergraduate career when they became familiar with the college union on their campus. As current student affairs professionals working closely with unions, participants also articulated how the organization ties into broader campus initiatives or culture, as well as what policies it must abide by as a public place and university entity. This collection of viewpoints from a variety of times and locations from both participants and the researcher combine to present a contextual understanding of the college union environment by Latinx individuals. Thus, the final product is told through the collective voice of the participants, arranged by the researcher, to shed light on the meaning and impact of college union environments for Latinx identifying populations.

### **Research Questions**

The primary research question that guided this study was: What are Latinx student affairs professionals' experience in college and how do they perceive the college union as a space and resource for Latinx students? This study focused on understanding how Latinx student affairs professionals, who were also once students themselves, perceived the college union environment. Interview questions were formulated to generate narrative responses from participants as they reflected on their experiences in college unions from their time as students up to current professional experiences. A sample of these interview questions include:

- In your undergraduate experience, is there a prominent moment or memory where you found yourself relying on personal cultural knowledge or values that motivated you to continue?
- Drawing from your undergraduate and professional experiences, please describe any spaces or services that are marketed in a way that Latinx students are familiar with them.
- How would you describe how the union communicates with outside campus organizations to advance the work of the union as well as the campus?

These questions were not constructed to strictly focus on college unions because support systems that participants relied on outside the college union helped explain their experiences in college and may not have currently existed in their college union. This research focuses on understanding the participants' experiences in college across various contexts and spaces since that is how individuals live their lives – moving in and out of spaces carrying their previous experiences with them. The hope was to understand participants' experiences and their perception of college union spaces so that support for persistence of Latinx students can be maximized in the “living room” on college campuses.

### **Research Design**

While there is a growing body of literature that focuses on Latinx college experiences and intersectional identities, there is a marked lack of research exploring these perspectives attached to the realm of college union work (Barrett, 2014; Godfrey, 2018; Smith, 2019). However, there are instances in which students referenced the

college union in interviews during research exploring their identities on college campuses (Gonzalez, 2002; Hurtado & Carter, 1997). In these cases, college unions were not ideal places for them, as they felt they did not feel welcomed in the student activities office (usually placed in college unions) and unions were seen as a part the dominant environment that did not acknowledge other cultures (Hurtado & Carter, 1997). They also reflected that college unions felt akin to the broader college environment, as interactions that felt racially insensitive continued in those spaces. Von Robertson, Bravo, and Chaney (2016) described “counter-spaces” as a unique place where students sought out and personally developed areas within the college environment that validated their experiences as Latinos. In their research, student organizations and their physical spaces held significance for a select range of participants by functioning as counter spaces. They noted that college unions were absent in the descriptions of such student organization counter spaces, and therefore seen as detached or separate from them.

Therefore, as existing literature does not focus specifically on how college unions contribute to the growth and development of Latinx individuals in higher education, this research study was constructed from a qualitative, narrative approach (Kim, 2015). It sought to understand how college unions both do and do not function in the lives of Latinx individuals. The underlying theory that shaped the narrative inquiry and added structure for findings was the culturally engaging campus environment (CECE) model (Museus, 2014). This model was utilized to understand how individual characteristics work with college unions’ cultural relevance (events, services, physical spaces, and artifacts) and responsiveness (espoused values and actions), or lack thereof. Participants’

stories were analyzed to understand components of when, how, and where participants engaged their Latinx identities. The impact of how space functioned as a sum of the environment, including physical buildings, objects, and members, are considered and explored.

In exploring these facets, a negotiation of cultures is likely to occur, as Museus and Quaye (2009) described such interactions as “culture(s) of origin and immersion” that produces an “emergent intercultural perspective” (p.76). College unions, as elaborated in their historical detail in Chapter 2, deal with such cultures of origin (ex. dominant identities rooted in their history) as well as immersion (ex. student and staff personal cultures that are introduced over time) that mix in their spaces. This concept notes the importance of all staff, not just those of minoritized identities, as agents in the process of enforcing and building a culturally inclusive environment for students. Specifically, this research hopes to articulate how college unions can act in the principle that “the quality and quantity of minority students’ connections with various cultural agents on their respective campuses is positively associated with their likelihood of persistence” (Museus & Quaye, 2009, p. 86). For this reason, no specific institutional types were selected (i.e., region or Carnegie classification) to explore a variety of college union experiences as shared by the participants.

During two semi structured interview sessions, using approximately twelve guiding questions, data was collected. The pacing and structure of each interview allowed for the development of trust between the participants and the primary researcher (Fraser, 2004). It also provided opportunities for me to further prompt participants based on

emerging ideas. The participants' responses contributed additional relevant insights (Fraser, 2004). Data checks included individual debriefs with participants. The reasoning for these approaches is explained in detail in Chapter 3. The results of this research are presented in Chapter 4 exploring how student unions function in the lives of Latinx individuals. These insights guide suggestions for improvement, located in Chapter 5.

### **Definition of Terms**

**College Union.** In 1956, the Association of College Unions self-defined themselves as the “community center of the college, for all the members of the college family -students, faculty, administration, alumni, and guests. It is not just a building; it is also an organization and a program. Together they represent a well-considered plan for the community life of the college” (Stevens, 1969, p.18). In addition, they often informally refer to themselves as the “living room” or “hearthstone” of the college (ACUI, n.d.). This self-definition has mostly held, though today they may also be called student centers, student associations, and other variations.

Further, the scope and placement of each version of such organizations on college campuses throughout the United States can significantly differ. Regardless, common characteristics include that they house activity and lounge spaces, a variety of services like computer labs or student club offices and employ college students managed by a specialized set of staff. By any name, Rullman and Harrington (2014) explained that the “college union facilities influence community, learning, and engagement due to the social implications of space or what Strange and Banning (2001) referred to as proxemics.” Throughout this paper, the term college union is used for its traditional significance as the



unifying and connecting force for all students on campus as they understand and merge their academic and extracurricular experiences (Butts, Beltramini, Boussa, Connelly, Meyer, Mitchell, Smith, & Willis, 2012). For this reason, this research endeavors to consider the impact college unions have in terms of support to Latinx populations based on the cultural engaging campus environment (CECE) model. However, if other research cited utilizes or references the college union in other terms (i.e., university center), the original statements by their respective authors are preserved.

One note to make is that in referencing throughout this report, college unions may appear as force unto themselves. That is, they are talked about in some ways as being embodiments of a universal force, capable of taking or influencing actions, which is not the reality. For those that work in unions, it seems this way – because union staff and advocates talk about “the union” as related to the college union idea (Butts, et al., 2012). However, it is the work of the stakeholders, students, staff, and others on the campus community that shape and influence the union just as much as the building and the idea of it being more than a physical space. Therefore, throughout this report I may continue to reference “the college union” as opposed to “the stakeholders whose work in college unions”, the latter being clearer about social implications involved in these units.

**Environment.** Throughout this report, the term environment is utilized to describe many concepts and ideas associated with spaces and space-making. The broad definition of these spaces is taken from Strange and Banning in their 2001 book *Educating by Design: Creating Campus Environments That Work*. Their defining of the environment includes both the physical design of spaces (how they are set-up and

geographically located) and those things that are considered “aggregate” to the space, such as the types of members present that creates another layer in the context and presence of higher education environments (Strange & Banning, 2001). However, implicit parts of spaces – that is – the organizations that oversee the distribution of space, as well as individual perceptions of spaces based on campus culture, are equally considered in the formation of this research and its results (Strange & Banning, 2001). Therefore, recognizing these factors, this research supports the perspective that “while safety, inclusion, and involvement are all necessary conditions for the achievement of educational purposes, they alone are insufficient to ensure an integrated, whole learning experience for students” (Strange & Banning, 2001, p. 110). These multiple facets are indubitably connected within the narratives of the participants and cannot be separated in the definition of environment in this research study.

**Latinx.** Perhaps the most complex term to define in this research is Latinx. This is due to the multiple convergences of academic, social, and institutional definitions in addition to the general lack of consensus that informs how this term is interpreted (Salinas & Lozano, 2017). Its origins as a recent term were first utilized in 2015 as LGBTQIA divisions of Spanish speaking people introduced the term for gender neutrality (Salinas & Lozano, 2017). It currently is most predominately used in academic contexts by students, staff, and professionals of higher education (Salinas & Lozano, 2017). Thus, this paper, it is used as an “inclusive term that recognizes the intersectionality of sexuality, language, immigration, ethnicity, culture, and phenotype” (Salinas & Lozano, 2017). However, due recognition is given in that the term is highly

debated in broader society and its use will likely continue to evolve and develop, which provides the option to reject this term in research contexts (Nichols, 2017; Salinas & Lozano, 2017).

For this reason, while it used to define those of Latin descent broadly as a parameter of this research, the participants are not required to define themselves strictly with this definition (Salinas Jr., & Lozano, 2017). If they chose to disclose, the primary researcher would utilize any specific terminology such as Latino/a, Chicano/a or Xicano/a, Mexican American, Puerto Riqueño, and so forth, that the participants use to refer to themselves when analyzing and interpreting their narratives. Further, prior research cited will utilize the terminology consistent with what is reported, which means there are additional places where the above examples or other terms such as Hispanic, may exist in this report.

**Latinidad.** In part of the variable usage and favor (or disfavor) amongst the collective consensus of Latinx, *latinidad* is used here to describe the broader cultural manifestations pan-Latinismo (Garcia, 2016). More intensively, the term *latinidad* represents “culture as a fluid terrain, one that emphasizes process, performance, and encounter” as opposed to a precise description that limits it to a single boundary of experience (Price, 2007, p. 81). In understanding what *latinidad* is, Price (2007) makes a powerful stance that is the convergence of place, people and climate that contributes to what is socially real, thus creating culture, and why it is continuously in flux. That is, as opposed to ideations that Latinos/as exist in a monolith. For instance, Mexicanos/as that exist in many urban cities in the United States and therefore come to the forefront as

being the only type of Latinx experience/perspective (Price, 2007). Culture, and how it manifests, is at the heart of this research, revealed within the narratives of those under the umbrella term of Latinx. Also, it is a part of college environments that create tensions of integration amongst minoritized identities. For these reasons, it is used to honor and broadly define the intricacies of Latinx heritage and modern experiences, which create the fluid concept of culture and how it interacts with and changes in the presence of college unions.

**Persistence.** As a concept, persistence is grounded in the ideology of involvement and mutual learning in college environments that leads to an increased sense of belonging and the likelihood to graduate (Tinto, 1998). For these characteristics, it is a primary concept defined in this study, as opposed to the highly utilized concept of resilience. Closely linked to outcomes for student success with persistence, resilience instead focuses on the internal beliefs and values of a student, which can determine how they “respond positively to challenges” (Yeager & Dweck, 2012, p. 302). However, considering the impact and structure of college environments in implicit and explicit ways – it is difficult to summarize the successful experiences of Latinx students simply because they are resilient enough. Therefore, persistence functions in this paper as the mechanism by which participants navigate and function within college unions, which likewise provide opportunities for involvement and learning.

### **Delimitations**

For this study, delimitations were utilized to craft specific insight into college unions. Participants must have self-identified as Latino, or a related specific identity, as

well as currently employed directly under or jointly with college unions via another unit. While efforts were made to sample a group currently working directly within college unions, all selected participants had a history working in those spaces in their past and continued to be affiliated and connected to union work by occupying offices within college unions. Participants must have had a minimum of two years of experience as staff, beyond any student employment. This parameter was set to ensure that participants had developed a minimum depth of knowledge about college unions. Most importantly, they could reflect on first impressions of the college union as a recent experience as well as provide personal knowledge developed by employee interaction with union policies and services. This would include insight into how the union functions as a part of the college community. This knowledgebase forms the insider perspective sought in participants as those who understand student affairs and campus administration as well as retaining recent memories of their time as students. However, potential candidates would not qualify if they had over ten years' experience to ensure distance from undergraduate experiences were more recent and to produce a more relevant picture in the current timespan.

Participants could reside anywhere in the United States, as interviews were virtually conducted. Legal status as a permanent resident was not requested or required to qualify for participation. The minimum age was 19 years old as dictated by legal age in Nebraska. No maximum age was set as a delimiter since age is not a significant indicator of new professionals in higher education, accounting for a possible career transfer into college employment at any point. This study also focuses mainly on the student

experience. Because of the constraints of conducting a master's thesis it does not address the participants' experiences as staff members except for the ways that those helped explain the student experiences.

### **Limitations**

In the construction of research, limitations emerge as not every aspect can be feasibly addressed in a single research study. Methodological choices based on the narrative approach limits the type of data produced and cannot be applied to a variety of instances. For example, this research cannot act as a conclusive analysis for Latinx identifying persons in college unions, as this sample represents those who were highly involved and graduated (completed at minimum a Bachelor's). This sample also is not a definitive analysis of college unions as a culturally responsive environment, as the variety of locations and scopes of the unions inferred here are limited by the perspectives of the participants and therefore does not sample every union in the United States. The final population selected also lacked volunteers who worked directly in college unions, with interviews that were conducted mostly in English. In addition, constraints on time for conducting this research due to a thesis timeline limited interpretation. For these reasons, Chapter 3 contains a detailed discussion of the limitations of this study.

### **Conclusion**

Latinx is a key and continuously growing demographic sector of the college-going population. However, despite increasing positive enrollments, graduation rates do not match. As previous research has suggested, like the finding by Hurtado (1994), that "there are elements of institutional culture, perhaps associated with its historical legacy of

exclusion, that continue to resist a Latino presence on campus” (p.35). In light of these concerns, college unions possess minimal research to affirm their stance as a champion of inclusivity in the university environment. This positionality is prevalent in espoused values but does not possess an exploration of the benefits or drawbacks for minoritized populations. Therefore, this paper brings forth the voices and perspectives of the Latinx population within the context of college unions. The results of the data were analyzed using the CECE model to understand which factors contributed to students’ sense of belonging. These were used to inform an understanding of support for this population in college unions. Ultimately, I hope to develop a better understanding of the college unions’ demonstrated ability to foster inclusion and community.

The course of this research will be fully explored in the following chapters, starting with Chapter 2 that will review existing evidence of Latinx experiences in higher education, the history of college unions, and reasoning for cultivating a culturally responsive union environment. Details regarding the methodology of narrative research, recruitment strategies, data analysis, and construction of findings are in Chapter 3. Chapter 4 presents the findings of the data presented as a composite narrative based on insights from participants. Chapter 5 concludes the topic by connecting it back to previous literature and making recommendations for practice and research.

## **Chapter 2**

### **Literature Review**

#### **Introduction**

Multiple layers of literature are critical to building a background of understanding for the research described in this report. To reiterate, the purpose of this study is to explore what are Latinx student affairs professionals' experience in college and how do they perceive the college union as a space and resource for Latinx students. Therefore, this literature review is composed of two parts related to the topic – Latinx student experiences in higher education and understanding the role of college unions in higher education. Latinx students are examined comprehensively, including historical context and modern educational pipeline, to fully describe the variety of factors identified as relevant to their college journeys. The second section will cover the history of college unions, emphasizing their current mission, importance as a part of the campus, and their influence on students. These elements together represent the grounding to existing literature contributing to this topic.

#### **Understanding the Latinx Higher Education Experience**

In exploring and determining causes for Latinx student success in higher education, the research becomes notably tangled and far spread over many factors such as time, ethnic/cultural identity/identities, place, and sources of knowledge and support. Overwhelmingly, the literature indicates that “the Latino relationship to higher education is a complicated one. Never a simple story of progress, the Latino narrative has been marked by a dialectic of educational access and societal constraint, of opportunity,



achieved and expectations tempered” (MacDonald, Botti, & Clark, 2007. p. 474). Since their earliest enrollments in the 1960s, Latinx students have represented a rapidly growing and consistent segment of college-going individuals (Fry, Parker, & Pew Research Center, 2018). Current estimates for Latinx populations in colleges have more than doubled from the years 2000 to 2015, representing nearly 20% of the college-going population in 2016 (Cantú, 2019). Following this rise, scholarly inquiry into this population has risen in equal part as the gap between those Latinx degree holders (ranging from associates to doctorate) compared to Latinx enrollment rates continues to expand (Santiago, Laurel, Martinez, Bonilla, & Labandera, 2019).

Broadly, Latinx enrollment in the American college system is short when placed into its earliest history, beginning in the 1600s with the formation of colonial and religious institutions (Thelin & Gasman, 2011). At the time of their founding, early colleges in the colonial United States were based on European examples and idealism, changing in response to various social and political actions of the emerging nation (MacDonald & Garcia, 2003; Thelin & Gasman, 2011). These shifts include the acquisition of land from Mexico and Puerto Rico that expanded the United States but resulted in restrictions on educational attainment for the populations residing in those territories (MacDonald & Garcia, 2003). Indeed, as the nation focused on segregationist policies until the passing of lesser-known *Sweatt v. Painter*, granting law school access to an African American man as the forerunner of *Brown v. the Board of Education*, higher education institutions provided little intentional support for equitable access to minoritized populations, including Latinx (Kidder, 2003). However, few working-class

Latinos quietly entered postsecondary education in alarmingly small numbers during the 1950s with support from philanthropies and GI Bill military benefits (MacDonald & Garcia, 2003). As an educated minority, those students became the leaders, organizers and newly contracted faculty within universities, helping Chicano and Puerto Rican support groups, as the 1960s saw race relations boil to the surface with increased social demands of greater access and integration from a variety of civil rights and race-based advocacy groups (MacDonald & Garcia, 2003). These movements began to shift many longstanding rules and policies that had existed prior, leading to the slow start of policy reform and college practices such as designation of appropriate admissions, curriculum and research centers (Thelin & Gasman, 2011; MacDonald & Garcia, 2003; MacDonald, Botti, & Clark, 2007). The energy and vigor of these movements resulted in Hispanic and Latino exclusive institutions, akin to Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs), though few survived past the 1980s (MacDonald, Botti, & Clark, 2007).

It was in the 1980s that the issue of attainment versus enrollment in higher education became imperative as an indicator that equitable access for the Latinx population had yet to not been achieved (MacDonald, Botti, & Clark, 2007). Following further presses to explicitly state and provide support for Latinx identifying students, amended reforms in government sought to pass further grants and aid as demographic conscious developed through the 1990s (MacDonald, Botti & Clark, 2007). Scholarly research has since worked to understand, identify, and mediate the gaps of Latinx student educational achievements (Gándara, 2010). Insights into the population have been notably complicated, with continuing contrasts in approaches based on student-centered

abilities to assimilate and succeed in college environments in contrast to situational based approaches that seek to understand and breakdown systemic barriers that hinder success (Castillo, Conoley, Choi-Pearson, Archuleta, Phoummarath, & Van Landingham, 2006). Recognizing these approaches, a collective sum of the modern experience of Latinx students is articulated to understand the converging personal and social system constructs that influence higher education outcomes. These elements influencing outcomes are categorized into the following: pre-college experiences, college selection, and enrollment, and the navigational and coping strategies used by Latinx students in the college environment.

**Pre-college experiences as influences for academic dispositions.** As highlighted in-depth in their book, *Higher Education Access and Choice for Latino Students* (2015), Perez and Ceja affirm the many influential multiplicities that exist as influencers before Latinx students enter an official post-secondary environment. Primary examples include low academic rigor due to low-resource neighborhoods, limited access to college preparation and decreased likelihood to be encouraged to attend college (Crisp, Taggart, & Nora, 2015; Gándara, 2015). These issues are exacerbated by increased competitive collegiate applications that focus on high academic achievement and test scores, which many geographically constrained Latinx students are automatically disadvantaged by the lack of access to the above mentioned high-level math, English and college preparatory courses (Sanchez, Usinger, & Thorton, 2015). For example, those students who reside in lower socioeconomic communities attend schools that do not generally offer these types of courses, whereas they are considered a staple in

communities with higher economic status. Students in urban cities may be moved into such schools by their parents' efforts to ensure their access to these types of educational resources, but students in rural areas remain hampered by their geographic location that offers less schooling options and no natural form of relocation. These experiences contribute to the level of academic achievement available, as well as shape early attitudes to the type of educational attainment personally believed possible by these students (Arbona & Nora, 2007).

These early perceptions are critical, as Gándara (2015) revealed that attitudes towards higher education are generally established by the time Latinx students reach high school graduation. For instance, if a student intended to apply for college they will do so, with high school tracking efforts only making a nominal difference between applications between "safe" (schools students feel they will be accepted into) and "reach" (schools students feel they might qualify for) colleges or choice to attend a two versus four-year institution (Gándara, 2015). In conjunction with personal factors and life experiences with prior educators, family, economic needs, social norms, even if a student had access to some specialty courses and possess mid-level entrance exam scores, college can feel unattainable for many (Manzano-Sanchez, Matarrita-Cascante, & Outley, 2019).

As a result, Latinx students might choose a "safe" two-year community college path towards a technical certificate as opposed to applying for a STEM scholarship to a mid-level college outside of their home state. This confluence of pre-college factors represents a converging set of personal and environmental factors in Latinx students lived experiences that strongly suggest long term attitudes to self-perceptions of educational

attainment and success (Manzano-Sanchez et al., 2019; Sanchez, Usinger, & Thorton, 2015). These perceptions are inseparable from the consciousness of college going Latinx students and largely determine their college choice for enrollment and the subsequent ways in which they are challenged by the college environment and how they will interact within it.

**College selection and entrance into higher education.** Based on their pre-college experiences, Latinx students enroll in a variety of types of institutions. The highest concentration of Latinx students, slightly over 50% (Santiago et al., 2019) select two-year community colleges based on favorable perceptions of open access, variable class schedules and lower cost (Gloria, Castellanos, & Herrera 2016; Kurlaender, 2006; Martinez & Fernandez, 2004). Elsewhere, enrollment at public four-year universities is 36%, capping private selections as 13% of the Latinx student population (Santiago et al., 2019).

Despite institutional types, a growing segment of schools hold or are seeking the label Hispanic Serving Institution (HSI). To qualify for this classification, an institution must meet the following requirements: “(1) be accredited and non-profit (2) have at least 25 percent Latinos/as undergraduate full-time equivalent enrollment (3) at least 50 percent of the Latino/a students are low-income” (Contreras, Malcom, & Bensimon, 2008). If this designation is established, schools qualify for additional grant funding to create services and support for Latinx students, though the research of the impact of individual programs is left to the institution themselves and not tracked through the government grant agency (Contreras, et al., 2008). As the US economy has fluctuated

since the creation of HSI grants, this funding is not as generous or reliable as more schools receive the certification, exemplified by the 2016-2017 sample year that included 492 enrolled institutions and an additional 333 awaiting accreditation (Smith-Barrow, 2018). Amongst HSI institutions, a 2018 analysis included 523 institutions, generally concentrated in California, Texas, Puerto Rico, and New York, enrolling 66% of Latinx students (Santiago et al., 2019). They also were more likely to be in urban cities or suburbs as four-year institutions and possess high Pell grant awards, though the most significant growth for emerging HSIs included 35 states, in particular, “Utah, Oregon, Nebraska, Iowa, Georgia, and Hawaii” (Núñez, Crisp, & Elizondo, 2016; Santiago, et. al., 2019, p. 15). This data correlates with the perceived shifts of Latina/os into non-predominant zones (e.g., outside of California, Texas), and further emphasizes the point that enrollment gains do not indicate equitable education opportunities for this segment (Hatch, Mardock Uman, & Garcia, 2016). Based on such analysis, reliance on a single set of state demographics or HSI standing is not conclusive nor indicative of the ability for Latinx students to persist to graduation (Hatch, et al., 2016).

Amongst the vast types of institutions, and the pre-college factors that influence them, there is no clear evidence that can be used to signify or explain precise experience(s) that lead to positive outcomes of persistence. This reality complicates the dialogue of educational achievement for Latinx in higher education. From this basis, due exploration is warranted to understand how Latinx students navigate and cope with post-secondary environments to persist to graduation.

**Coping mechanisms and persistence in college.** In conjunction with their pre-academic dispositions and despite college selection, including HSIs, Latinx students must navigate the broader college environment. There are two primary dimensions that interact with each other and contribute to Latinx student success in the research: personal coping mechanisms that act as tools to navigate environments (e.g. resilience, code-switching, support groups or relationships) and the cumulative college environment (Arbona & Nora, 2007; Campa, 2010; Garza, Bain, & Kupczynski, 2014; Gonzales, 2015). A variety of research exists describing the personal coping mechanisms in which Latinx navigate their college experiences. The most oft mentioned include *resilience* as “the ability to thrive, mature and increase competence in the face of adverse circumstance or obstacles” and drawing on “all resources, both environmental and personal” (Gordon, 1996, p. 63-64). As a concept, resilience is enhanced by the tenants of self-concept (MacDonald, Botti, & Clark, 2007; Pajares & Schunk, 2001), self-efficacy (Bandura, 2010) and access to various types of knowledge; cultural, aspirational, linguistic, familial, social, navigational, and resistant, described as forms of *capital* (Luthans, Luthans, & Luthans, 2004; Rios-Ellis, Rascón, Galvez, Inzunza-Franco, Bellamy, & Torres, 2015). This works directly with *code-switching*, defined “as a means of drawing on symbolic resources and deploying them to gain or deny access to other resources, symbolic or material” (Campa 2010; Heller, 1992;). Both resilience and code-switching, acknowledge or unacknowledged, are essential as Latinx students form supportive relationships or groups (Pyne & Means, 2013; Rios-Ellis et al., 2015;). Supportive relationships can become forms of mentorship. Crisp and Cruz define mentorship as any relationship in which “(a)

psychological and emotional support, (b) support for setting goals and choosing a career path, (c) academic subject knowledge support aimed at advancing student's knowledge relevant to their chosen field, and (d) specification of a role model" exists (as cited in Luedke, 2017, p. 38).

This complicated interaction of the environment and student persistence is counteracted by perceived negative experiences in the college environment and therefore affecting their sense of belonging (Consuelo & Amory, 2007; Gonzales, 2015). Most importantly, Latinx students themselves may not necessarily feel that they lack the personal strategies to overcome encountered barriers, but without adequate access to non-discriminatory sources of help and validation from the campus environment they face a dysphoric reality to persist (Franklin, 2016; Gloria, et al., 2016; Gloria, Castellanos, & Orozco, 2005; Holloway-Friesen, 2018; Turner, 2015). This is important as educators consider the role and purpose of college unions with consideration for Latinx students.

*Bringing the elements together.* Despite the personal ways in which Latinx students' can cope with and navigate through their academic experiences, a sense of belonging and integration into the college environment has proven to be a vital contributor to success based on student development theory. Tinto provided the earliest rendition of the importance of integration, affirming that involvement in and out of the classroom is vital for student persistence as they shape personal feelings of belonging and support (Tinto, 1998). Tinto's work on persistence is both challenged by and incorporated into the culturally engaging campus environment (CECE) theory developed by Museus (2014). The CECE model merges the various internalized personal and external



environmental factors that converge to makeup culturally engaging campuses, emphasized through the environment by nine primary indicators. These nine indicators are cultural familiarity, culturally relevant knowledge, cultural community service, opportunities for meaningful cross-cultural engagement, collectivist cultural orientations, culturally validating environments, humanized educational environments, proactive philosophies, and availability of holistic support (Museus, 2014). To affirm, the definition of environment used here includes the physical structures of spaces, human aggregates present in such spaces, espoused and actualized messages signaled by the sum of those pieces (Strange & Banning, 2001).

Traditional theories of integration rested on the motivations of students, focusing on how it is the “student’s responsibility to embrace the existing context” of universities by assimilation (Castillo, et. al., 2006, p.267). However, this negates the responsibility that institutions hold to provide safe, equitable access to all students based on their contributions to the campus as stakeholders (Franklin, 2016). Most importantly, the context of the environment was found to hold higher weight on student persistence than internal values alone (Aguinaga & Gloria, 2014) which utilized the psychosociocultural model to understand the relationship between students’ attributes and the effect of the environment on their ability to persist. In particular, their report identified the importance of contextualizing the saliency of cultural identity to participants, shown in the duality they possessed in Mexican and Anglo orientations, as responsive to the environment that is dependent on staff and other college personnel to lead and contribute to ensure it is positively responsive to student needs (Aguinaga & Gloria, 2014).

The positive and negative interactions experienced by Latinx students in the college environment is further emphasized in the literature. Gonzalez (2002) described these interactions as existing in three layers, defined as “the social world, the physical world, and the epistemological world” (p. 201) that directly explores and correlates with the definition of environment by Strange and Banning (2001). Stebleton and Alexio (2015) found that experiences in the college environment affected undocumented students as they navigated their college experiences. Namely, their sense of safety in revealing their identity and perception of barriers influenced the types of significant experiences (positive and negative) that affected them in their journey. Most effectually, Turner (2015) described that the layering of Latinx identities as subject to how the environment is expressed in colleges, arguing for the need to create culturally nurturing environments that build on students’ expressed needs and works. As these works call for an increasing focus on the environment, Harper and Hurtado (2007) conducted a review of the literature and focus groups on perceptions of the college environment for minoritized students and staff. The following critical main themes emerged:

cross-race consensus regarding institutional negligence, race as a four-letter word and an avoidable topic, self-reports of racial segregation, gaps in social satisfaction by race, reputational legacies for racism, white student overestimation of minority student satisfaction, the pervasiveness of whiteness in space, curricula, and activities, the consciousness-powerlessness paradox among racial/ethnic minority staff, and unexplored qualitative realities of race in institutional assessment. (Harper & Hurtado, 2007)

These systemic issues crossed the pipeline of experiences of those interviewed and revealed the ways in which the college environment continues to be plagued by issues from its formation and current context. Despite calls for and claims of valuing diversity and support of minoritized students – the study concluded that these have not been fully actualized in the modern context. Therefore, it affects the psyche of persistence for students, forming an understated barrier. Recommendations for practice from this report thus affirmed:

that administrators, faculty, and institutional researchers proactively audit their campus climates and cultures to determine the need for change. As indicated in many of the nine themes, racial realities remained undisclosed and unaddressed in systematic ways on college campuses. As long as administrators espouse commitments to diversity and multiculturalism without engaging in examinations of campus climates, racial/ethnic minorities will continue to feel dissatisfied, all students will remain deprived of the full range of educational benefits accrued through cross-racial engagement, and certain institutions will sustain longstanding reputations for being racially toxic environments. (Harper & Hurtado, 2007, p.20)

Based on this information, an understanding of the scope of the college union as a unique phenomenon is critical to developing a community for Latinx students and warrants due attention. In conjunction with an understanding of the different facets, personal attributes, schooling experiences and discussion of the larger college environment is presented above. This is the basis of knowledge used to understand the first part of this research phenomenon about Latinx experiences in the college union.

## **The College Union**

Undertaking an exploration of college unions, this literature review includes their historical roots, transformation, and adoption of diversity in community building, and recent research. As noted in historical documentation by Chester Berry (1965), the earliest renditions of American collegiate student unions were based on British universities' male debate societies of the early 1800s. At the time, these men's groups and their locations were composed of students seeking opportunities to openly consider ideology, beliefs and other topics, convened in informal spaces outside of their classrooms (Berry, 1965). As these clubs increased in popularity, formally established spaces were created with additional attributes of private men's clubs - providing access to dining, smoking and other facilities for the use of this single demographic with social, intellectual and recreational incentives (Berry, 1965). From this influence, Harvard University is deemed as the first to establish a debating club in similar goals and physical attributes that would later become the college union (Jordan, & Vakilian, 2013). However, credit for the first formally recognized college union was established at Houston Hall at the University of Pennsylvania campus in 1869, as the roots and closest historic ancestor of the modern college union (Berry, 1965). Other early schools that adopted and advocated for the creation of these types of free socialization spaces included Brown University, the University of Michigan, University of Illinois, university of Wisconsin, and Ohio State University (Berry, 1965). As early union spaces, they identified a need for student government, recognized staff, community recreational spaces and activities, and so began to explore how to best cultivate and implement these

into their centers (Berry, 1965). In seeking a common definition and standard of execution, the National Association of Student Unions (NASU), today known as ACUI, hosted its first conference in 1914 as representatives of these universities sought to establish mutual goals of operations for this specific type of college space (Berry, 1965). In this way, student unions arose from the ideological needs of male European social clubs and were recrafted in the United States. However, college unions would expand further, challenging their original founding principles as a male-focused space of intellectual and leisure pursuits to include ever more diverse students.

**Rapid development in college unions.** Student unions began to rapidly evolve from the 1920s to the 1940s, in part by the Great Depression and World Wars (Jordan, & Vakilian, 2013). For these reasons, student unions developed as central spots for both educational pursuits and aspects of leisure activities, the earliest iteration of the mission and college unions today. While in development of their own union space at Oregon University in 1925, President W. J. Kerr remarked that “there comes a time in the life of every large educational institution when its departments and activities become so diverse and specialized that it needs the unifying force of a great social center to retain its solidarity” (Stevens, 1969). With this type of thought, despite the economic dent of those times, colleges continued to start capital campaigns, and student boards passed higher activity fees to fund new student union buildings (Berry, 1965). College union activities broadened to cover more casual pursuits as students gathered together to support peers that had gone to serve in the international fight and provide a sense of comfort in everyday life that had been disrupted (Jordan & Vakilian, 2013).

Most importantly, college unions became an integral thread in the development of student affairs as a profession, and women stepped into leadership roles and integrated into the newly renamed and expanded Association of College Unions (ACU), formerly NASU (Jordan & Vakilian, 2013). These changes created co-educational zones in a time where gendered spaces were the norm for male and female students who would often work, study, and socialize in separate areas (Berry, 1965). Post-war, an unprecedented number of new enrollments from the passing of the G.I Bill resulted in many new unions opening across the nation, many as memorials to honor those that had served in the wars (Jordan, & Vakilian, 2013). As a solution, it was pointed out that “colleges had seen what the canteen and recreation centers had meant to the serviceman away from home. A counterpart on the campus--a union-- now loomed importantly as an answer to many problems of campus life” (Butts, 1967). Examples of Memorial Unions today include Fort Hays State University in Kansas or the University of Wisconsin - Madison , though many more exist across the United States. The end of this early era saw unions become central to the campus and set the tone for scholastic and practical changes that would occur in the 1950s and 1960s (Berry, 1965).

**College union transformation through diversification.** By 1956, the ACU had over 250 members and established their statement of purpose, claiming their stake as the "hearthstone" of the campus, with “its goal... the development of persons as well as intellects.” (Stevens, 1969). ACUI, as it is named today, became official in 1964 with constituents in Asia, Europe, and Australia (Jordan & Vakilian, 2013). Pedagogically, college unions were being shaped by a new crop of scholars and interest in the field, as

shown in the influence of such scholars as Chester Berry and Porter Butts who were highly influential college union leaders (Jordan & Vakilian, 2013). As college unions expanded, they became hot spots of integration and cooperation between students, faculty, staff, and alumni. One early advocate for college unions, as quoted in their new building pamphlet, stated the hope that the student union would “play a part in cementing really great friendships -- friendships between men and women, between faculty and students, between men of all groups, races, and nationalities" (Berry, 1965). This sentiment coincides with the vision at that time that the college union could be a significant part of higher education, developing students through active engagement as a community and host to a variety of needs (Butts, 1967). As mentioned already, college unions had already sought out and integrated male and female students in a shared common space, where they generally held separate academic and leisure spaces as traditionally separate due to social values (Berry, 1965). After that, they also played a role in the integration of racially diverse students. In one oral account given during a tour of the Indiana Memorial Union at Indiana University (IU), around the time of the Civil Rights Movement, the director of the union fought against discrimination from the surrounding community by declaring African American students should not only freely use the Union spaces, but the local community should accept them as well (Dahlegre, personal communication, 2018). Any business that refused to serve such students would be purposefully targeted to no longer receive business from IU, a statement that pushed to change attitudes for students of color not only within the institution but beyond (Dahlegre, personal communication, 2018).

As the 60s and 70s faced increased awareness and concern around social movements and expanded world views from international tensions, college unions in the United States and abroad in places like Europe and Asia were likewise affected (Butts, et al., 2012; Jordan, & Vakilian, 2013). Accounts of tumultuous events reveal how students became fractured over ideology and political issues as they continued use of college union spaces (Van Dyke, 1998). Indeed, a written observation from 1969 stated that:

students are demanding the opportunity to bring spokesmen for today's controversial issues and reforms to the campus; ... to become involved in the sense that they want to see, hear, discuss, and debate first hand those who are questioning the value system of society and those who are challenging the nation's (Stevens, 1969, p. 20).

Such an observation is not far from today's modern issues. Integrating the increased variety of students into the formalized union idea did not present itself as an easy task, but one that the Association called for since those period of social unrest and calls for the integration of new identities in spite of how it was being handled by overarching higher education settings (Jordan, & Vakilian, 2013; Stevens, 1969;). At this time, college unions firmly espoused the ideal that all communities be welcomed in their spaces, regardless of identity, and adequately served to ensure their purposeful development and integration into the college campus (Butts, et. al., 2012). The college union remained unwavering in its statement as the "hearthstone of the campus." In seeking to continue to prioritize the need to embrace the diversity of constituents, ACUI



created a variety of strategic initiatives and goals to emphasize college unions in the importance of building multicultural and inclusive for all students.

**Affirming the direction and values of college unions.** Overall, within a span of slightly over 150 years, the college union has made dramatic strides since its original inception as British, male debate clubs. Today, college unions exist in many different forms throughout the United States. Some feature hotels, bowling alleys, game rooms, theatres, multidimensional event spaces, dining, and workout centers (Berry, 1967). Others specialize in housing services and centers such as computer labs, student organization offices, multicultural or racial affinity centers, technology assistance, printing, and more (Schroer & Johnson, 2003). Ownership and management also vary, as they may operate under student affairs or as an auxiliary (Schroer & Johnson, 2003). They also can maintain various operating groups within their structures, such as student advisory boards, employment of full-time staff and part-time student employees and endeavor to uphold the ideal of college unions as a community space for all. Considering their inception, college unions have made considerable growth within a short period and with greater flexibility in terms of diversity and inclusion efforts relative to the broader institution of higher education. This is in part that the modern systems of higher education have extensive and longstanding structures and history are more complex to adapt to changes in students' demographics, as well as continually shrinking budgets and rising costs (Thelin & Gasman 2011). Through their history and claim of importance to the college union environment, both on individual campuses or with additional guidance from ACUI as a professional entity, the college union holds itself as a central purveyor of

campus culture. This role is emphasized through the importance of college unions creating environments that foster and support student development. Through their efforts, it is likewise inferred their position as agents of the type and breadth of the community available on campuses by provide spaces blends students' academic, extracurricular and personal lives.

Moving beyond historical framework, the college union increasingly has sought to confirm their positions as a community-building component through literature (Beltramini et al., 2013). As the college union idea took hold and was shaped by Porter Butts, he created a foundation of literary explorations about the importance of these college union spaces (Butts et al., 2012). Since then, sparse analysis exists for college unions as the spectrum of issues called for in higher education has become increasingly complex – particularly in the field of student affairs (Rouzer, DeSawal, & Yakaboski, 2014).

In spite of this, a variety of texts today reflect their espoused values of diversity, for example documented revisions to the “Role of the College Union” statement in 1996 and 2018 (ACUI, n.d.) and guiding works for organizational values established under the ACUI Task Force of 2000 (Milani et al., 1992). Other documents offer strategies to align stated values with actuatable steps. For instance, a chapter contribution to *New Directions for Student Personnel* explored the importance of multiculturalism in student union work via intentionally crafted physical spaces, organizational mission and/or vision statements, events/activities and employment (Banks, Hammond, & Hernandez, 2014). Brown and Taylor (2012) discussed how colleges unions could be sustained in the modern

environment and provided the following recommendations: “stewardship partners, listening to community members for simple, yet powerful, ideas, education with the values of stewardship, flexibility for a sustainable future, social norms, assessment, valuable web sites” (p. 63-64). Of these suggestions, the concepts of stewardship partners, listening to community members, education with values of stewardship, and flexibility for a sustainable future echo the core values espoused by unions by emphasizing a need to be responsive to constituents and functioning as a laboratory for community involvement (Brown & Taylor, 2012).

However, proving claims of union values in action is not readily available, and tends to exist in individual research projects conducted as a part of advanced degree programs. In 2013, DeSawal and Yakaboski analyzed 23 dissertations within the scope of the 30 years that pertained to college union knowledge finding that empirical evidence was brief based on analysis of existing research on college unions. Master's theses and dissertations recently remain as one of the primary avenues in which college unions are analyzed (for example, Barrett, 2014; Camputaro, 2018; Godfrey, 2018; Harrington, 2014; Janisz, 2014; Johnson, 2019; Maxwell, 2016; Reed, 2018; Smith, 2019; Smyth, 2016; Stagni, 2019;). Of interest in these reports, Barrett (2014) quantitatively confirmed the relationship of the “college union and students’ sense of community...[suggesting] that satisfaction with the college union is a predictor of satisfaction with students’ sense of community” (p. 133-134). This study rests on the claim that it was the first to identify such a relationship, noting that “evidence [from this questionnaire study concluded] that there is no difference in the relationship based on gender, institutional sector, or Hispanic

origin between students' satisfaction with the college union and their satisfaction with a sense of community on campus" (Barrett, 2014).

Amongst studies that focused on student sense of community by Camputaro (2018), Harrington (2014), Johnson (2019), Maxwell (2016), and Smyth (2016), the findings generally supported that the general sense of community was valued and that allocation and use of college unions took on various degrees of importance to students. However, Harrington (2014) acknowledged the difficulty of addressing racial concerns in their sample, as they used a case study on a single institution, and their interview protocol did not contain specific questions to explore this topic with participants. The other studies may have included Latinx and other minoritized identities, but it was not a guiding factor in the research (Harrington, 2014; Johnson, 2019; Maxwell, 2016). The findings in the report by Smyth (2016) did uncover five primary themes that positively contributed to community building in college unions: "student-centered, dynamic spaces, pathways to success, college is a conversation, and house of serendipity" (p. 87). Two dissertation studies were unique, as they focused on HBCU college union experiences, though one appeared as an early preview and was unavailable for complete review (Smith, 2019). The report by Godfrey (2018) however, produced a marked contrast from existing literature on college union space. Utilizing a sample of students and professionals, their qualitative phenomenological approach revealed the following main themes and subpoints:

- "Sense of Place or Just a Place?: Union as a destination & Barriers to use

- Where Have All the Students Gone?: The case of the unengaged student & The necessity of engagement
- The Resource Challenge: Providing activities & Providing a suitable space” (p.72)

Students identified barriers in the union through policies, intrapersonal experiences in the space, and their understanding and sense of the limitations of the physical space (Godfrey, 2018). Some discussed an awareness that the union did not serve everyone well, especially many students who remained disengaged and did not attach any meaning to the space beyond somewhere to go (Godfrey, 2018).

Administrators on the other hand, were more likely to discuss and affirm the union in its philosophical form of the union as the living room of campus. Further, they recognized the lack of student engagement as an issue that required improvement though they felt there was ample opportunities for engagement in the space that students did not utilize (Godfrey, 2018). An actively involved student leader on the campus, however, described the lack of engagement as a result of the student body suggestions “[feeling] like it's falling on deaf ears and that it's not really like a student driven union space for us.” (p. 57). Both groups, students and administration recognized the shifting needs of place and resources, expressing their limits in different ways that affect how they build their mission, while acknowledging a campus without a union would be a very different place (Godfrey, 2018).

Concerns about engagement, understanding student needs, and barriers to a sustained future of college unions were echoed in an extensive study by Janisz (2014). A

sample of 22 directors in college union activities answered questionnaires exploring the purpose, importance of types of amenities, barriers to operation and future influences (Janisz, 2014). Their findings called for a refocus on the long-taken stance of building community, noting that:

one barrier to student union effectiveness is an absence of assessment data that identifies student needs and gauges their satisfaction with the union, and data that evaluates and validates the union's contribution to the educational and co-curricular processes. Other critical barriers suggest that some unions have lost their focus on students; and some deal with staff, management, outsourced services, and campus leaders who lack an understanding of the union's purpose or do not understand their roles in student development as educators (p. 189).

Through the work of graduate students, interesting implications arise in the realm of addressing how sense of community is perceived in college unions. A fair segment concluded that students felt generally positive about the union their union experiences. This included how it fostered their sense of community and overall sense of belonging on campus. However, they were not crafted with intent to gather specific insights based on minoritized ethnic or racial identity. Interestingly, the study that considered a relatively constrained form of identity available at an HBCU, and therefore assuming its union space and students' spatial identities would align, did not include full, unwavering support of the space as an equitable home for all students. This research is conducted in light of these insights, between the literary pieces and empirical findings related to

college union environments – to uncover how Latinx perceive and understand the college union space.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, this literature review examined Latinx experiences in higher education environments. This includes their pre-college factors that form their values, motivations, and attitudes toward higher education. These affect their choice of college, which though they vary in size and scope, can include the presence of a college union. As they navigate their experiences, despite coping mechanisms used, the campus environment exerts a powerful influence on their ability to persist. In addition, the history and growth of college unions on university campuses were presented, detailing similar ideological roots to the foundation of higher education, but with a much shorter and radical period of transformation as they seek to be highly inclusive and increasingly diverse to match the demographics of their institutions. The discrepancy lies in where generally produced knowledge, affirming the positionality of support from college environments, as yet remains untested in context of Latinx experiences. Weaving these separate parts together, the research launches from these bases of knowledge to form a new understanding of college unions as a culturally validating environment.

## **Chapter 3**

### **Methodology**

This research is the result of recent, personal experiences within and around college unions through employment in an affiliated multicultural center office, an internship with the Association of College Unions International (ACUI), and undergraduate employment in a college union. As a critical part of my experiences developing as a student, and as a significant part of my current career path, the call for extensive research and literature into the field has helped shape the current direction of this paper. To reiterate, this research seeks to understand the college experiences of Latinx student affairs professionals' and how they perceive the college union as a space and resource for Latinx students. Likewise, identifying ways that the college union environment can respond and grow to support the needs of an increasingly diverse student population. This chapter explains my approach to and methods for critical in the shaping of the research.

#### **Constructivist Paradigm**

This research utilizes the constructivist paradigm as the primary lens for this study (Mackenzie & Knipe, 2006). This paradigm holds that “knowing” is a person’s ability to understand the complexities of life based on various historical, cultural, and social cues (Magoon, 1977). From this knowing, participants and researchers acknowledge and share the subjective meaning of these aspects (historical, cultural and social), used to understand the phenomenon under study in a way that rejects a single, generalizable result (Mills, Bonner & Francis, 2006). Further, it negates notions that the researcher can



approach the chosen inquiry with a completely objective stance, preserved throughout the process of conducting research (Mills, Bonner & Francis, 2006). In this study, the participants were asked about their experiences as Latinx in college spaces, specifically the college union, to understand their lived, subjective experiences as their constructed reality. In keeping with the constructivist mode, these experiences are gathered via interviews and analyzed through text documents that were reviewed and used to create visual maps of data analysis (Mackenzie & Knipe, 2006).

As narrative inquiry does not include a formulaic script of a single type of analysis that can be tracked to precise outcomes, the credibility of research takes on *different scopes of authenticity* (Seale, 1999). These are defined as *ontological* by which the researcher develops in-depth knowledge derived from the subject under study, *educative* as the results are interpreted in a way that is understandable to other viewpoints, *catalytic* by expressing a sense of action, and *tactical* by inspiring action in others (Seale, 1999). Therefore, constructivist research does not rely on “surface level” understanding of stories but deepens to explore the various ways that human experience shapes and is affected by individual modes of understanding (Golafshani, 2003).

### **Narrative Inquiry**

Narrative is a way of inquiring into lived experiences, a mingling of the researcher perspectives moving “alongside” stories of the participants (Clandinin, 2013). Narrative inquiry is not limited to topics, such as disciplines like psychology, medicine, law, and education (Kim, 2016), with the forms of data analysis broad (Chase, 2011). In this case, as the primary researcher, I approached and moved alongside the stories of the

participants that included their memories and the saliency of their cultural identity. These stories revealed the types of experiences and their development around and in college unions.

Exploring the work of Clandinin and Rosiek, Chase further described narrative inquiry as expanding beyond the “view [of] identifying oppressive discourses – [instead of focusing on] the ways in which [the] narrators disrupt them. [They] show that people create a range of strategies in relation to cultural discourses, and that individuals’ stories are constrained but not determined by those discourses” (2011, p.422). The tapping into the narrative lives of participants, therefore, is not merely to “name silenced lives” or “give voice,” but to “amplify other voices” for a specific “community to hear, their stories... blend[ed] and merg[ed] to interact with stories of other identities” to create meaning and fuel an underlying press for change (Chase, 2011, p.428). Therefore, the primary aims of the narrative are not generalizability or universal truth, but to explore a specific phenomenon and to expand the discourses that surround its place in the lives of people who experience it (Clandinin, 2013). Here the phenomenon is the college union, and the lived experiences start within the narratives of the participants to invite others to move alongside and consider their stories in context and the impact of those environments.

The work of shaping the story produced in this mode of research also relies on the agency of the individual’s stories, preserved over a series of structuring and restructuring by the researcher (Lewis, 2011). Therefore, the output is not a retelling or picking of quotes but requiring a philosophical and ethical commitment to preserving the stories

while sifting through multiple layers of meaning within the experiences of participants (Clandinin, 2013). From this philosophical framing, Clandinin and Connelly (2000) describe a variety of fundamental tenets that form the structuring and restructuring of participants' narratives. They establish the frames of temporality (time), place, and relationship to orientate the researcher in the process of narrative inquiry. Temporality refers to the real-time described by participants, but also the time they are living in their experience and the point at which the researcher enters their frame (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). The place is the "landscape" in which the stories revolve as the participants start with the researcher in conversation and travel to literal and remembered locations (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Relationship signifies the totality of relation throughout the time, place, and individuals; the researcher to the participant, the participant to the locations in their memory, the time in relation to place and so forth (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Because of these dimensions and its variety of modes, narrative inquiry requires motion described as "inward and outward, backward and forward" in experience through stories (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000).

Illustratively, as a researcher engaging the participant – I look "inward" to my own relational experiences with college unions through personal reflections in memory and as part of the journaling used to interpret the results. Looking inward also occurred from the perspectives of the participants, as I stepped into their lived memories as they described them. Then moving "outward" to understand the broader environment apart from the personal ways in which their experiences differ and shifts in perspectives of the college union. We began at present in our discussions but moved "backward" as they told

me about their student experiences and then “forward” to their current lives, while we mutually navigate a potential future in which the final composition and understanding of college unions based on this research text exists. This conveys the sense of being “in the midst” of experiences as a result of narrative exploration and considering steps to solving the research puzzle, instead of an all-encompassing research question, in a “three-dimensional” space (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000).

Therefore, how a researcher goes about exploration and finding of meaning in the midst is individualized (Clandinin, 2013). Throughout this process, meaning in experience was explored through the “field” (the narratives), clarified into “field texts” (documents exploring meaning) crafted into “research texts” (the final product of the research) (Clandinin, Steeves, & Caine, 2013). This process is the main characteristic of narrative as the “living, telling and retelling” of narratives. This is critical to this research text as it is used to describe experiences of Latinx identifying individuals from inside and outside collegiate spaces with an emphasis on college unions. The outcome of the narrative is shaping the shared understanding of how college union activities can support Latinx members of its community.

### **Participants**

Four primary criteria were used to recruit and select participants. Participants had to be (1) Latinx, or similar resonating identity (2) 19 years old and older (3) current student affairs professionals working in or jointly with college unions in a related department (4) possessing minimum 2 -3 years professional experience with no more than maximum of 10 years of experience. To clarify professional connection to college

union, the participant must have met one of two conditions: either direct employment with their college union organization (e.g. as building manager, promotional or event staff) or a close relationship through an in-house affiliated group (e.g., adjacent groups functioning in college union spaces like student life/activities or identity affirming center, like Women's center, LGBTQ support, multicultural or affinity group, or Greek Life). Candidates for this study were recruited through two methods, purposeful and snowball sampling. Advertisements for participation were posted in digital professional association forums for current staff in student affairs work.

Location was not a primary criterion for selection, as college unions varied across the nation and accounted for the breadth of union experiences they could have had by the time of interviewing. Selected participants who completed this study communicated via email with me to express interest, completed an initial demographic questionnaire and participated in three separate virtual meetings of up to one hour each. The first two meetings were interviews, and the third meeting was used to member check the composition of early field texts. Four participants completed all three meetings. Two candidates who had an interest in the study did not complete the required steps for participation. One was not interviewed because they did not complete the initial demographic survey, and one did not complete the last two interviews after expressing interest in participating. Reminder emails were sent on the third day post their last correspondence or arranged interview date to those who had expressed interest. These reminders explained the steps left for completion as well as ensuring they were free to leave the study at any time.

Any identifiable information related to the chosen participants or their respective institution(s) has been changed to be more general, replaced with a pseudonym, or omitted to protect their confidentiality as research participants (Pyne & Means, 2013).

At the start of data collection, each participant was given the option to self-select or be assigned a personal pseudonym. A list of identifying characteristics of participants is illustrated in Table 1. For this research, the Latinx identity was salient and varied among participants. Therefore, the table includes a description of the primary lens or mode within latinidad in which the participant identified. I used the description they provided in their interviews, though the precise identities are not included here (e.g., country names or specific groups) to protect their identities. An additional note is that none of the research participants currently worked directly for a college union organization but worked closely with and near a college union. One participant disclosed working as an undergraduate building manager in their student union.

*Table 1. Participant Characteristics*

Name	Latinx Identity Lens	Years of Professional Experience	Current Professional Area
Adia	Ethnographic*	5	Multicultural Affairs
Jorge	Nationalistic	6	Multicultural Affairs
Lyvia	Cultural Connection**	9	Multicultural Affairs
Luis	Cultural Connection**	4	Greek Affairs

*Note: Some participants have graduate school experiences, which are accounted for according to the industry standard of one (1) year professional experience per two-year program length.*

\*group attachment based on national and social connections, constrained by geographic location

\*\*beliefs and practices that reinforce personal understanding and connection to a specific cultural identity/manifestation

### **Research Settings**

The participants currently work at a variety of institutions from four different regions of the United States. The regions spanned from the Rocky Mountains to the Atlantic Coast. Participants worked in the Midwest -West and East North Central, Northeast – Middle Atlantic and New England, South - West South Central. Collectively, they had experience working at eleven unique institutions. This information is included to describe how the institutions experienced and described by participants are varied and spread throughout the United States.

Three of the participants had attended and received their undergraduate diplomas from four-year universities. One had attended both a two-year college and four-year university during their undergraduate journey. All the universities were public schools, ranging from mid to large size populations and fall under the classification of predominantly white institutions (PWIs), with two also serving as HSIs.

Each participant had worked professionally at a minimum of two institutions. Two worked at three different institutions and one at four institutions. Three disclosed graduate experiences working in the union that was counted in the participant descriptions as a part of their number of years of professional experience; each year of graduate experience was counted as half a year of professional experience. These institutions were more varied and included small, medium, and large colleges, including

religiously affiliated institutions. They also were spread across community, public and private colleges and different regions of the United States.

### **Data Collection**

Demographic information, including prior positions and institutions, worked at, were collected from participants was used to determine eligibility and provide context for their narratives. Participants were emailed a copy of the informed consent (see Appendix A) to be reviewed before the start of data collection and a copy of the interview questions (see Appendix J). Participants chose a mode of communication for the meetings of either video chat or telephone. Each session was a maximum of one hour, to allow adequate time for each participant to discuss the questions in a semi-structured format or explain additional details relevant to their stories (Kim, 2016). Audio was recorded during each session to capture their stories as told by the participants, to be able to revisit them later for aid in constructing field texts (Connelly & Clandinin, 2000).

Twelve primary questions guided the first and second semi-structured (Kim, 2016) interviews (see Appendix J), shaped by tenets found within the culturally engaging campus environments (CECE) model (Museus, 2014). The questions were used to elicit stories from the participants about the saliency of latinidad and other identities, support structures utilized on their college campus, insights into their college union experiences and professional observations on those structures.

### **Data Analysis**

Data analysis began while data was being collected and continued in several phases after collection ended. I began the creation of field texts by taking notes during



interviews to gain familiarity with the whole scope of participant's narratives. Interviews were transcribed and used in the final meeting. Also, notes were taken during each session and annotated with further questions or topics to explore with the participants post each session. They were then used to compose a subsequent field text that analyzed participant narratives broken into the time frames of being a student and as a professional because it helped to understand the research question. At their final interview session, field texts were given to each participant for review to validate interpretations of the student/professional frames. The session was also used to ask further questions found in the review of the documents by the primary researcher. Participants were provided with one week to review the provided field texts where they could add further notes, questions, or revisions.

The transcripts were read during audio playback and further edited to include the nuances in the settings and plot of the field texts and aid in the creation of interim text (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). In addition, a researcher journal was kept throughout the data interpretation process to track researcher connections and reflections as the final research text emerged (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Data displays tracking situations, places and related experiences in groups based on student, professional and college union dimensions were then created to identify overlapping patterns in the specified categories to guide thematic interpretations (Kim, 2016). The highest frequency of ideas, actions, places amongst the participants was used to cross-reference parts of their narratives and connection to the CECE model.

Employing elements of narrative smoothing (Kim, 2016), I created a fictional story. The characters presented in the story I created to describe the findings are not the direct voice and experiences of any single person – but the melding of all participants’ lived experiences in various contexts. This format was selected to protect the participants’ identities as well as explore complex meanings (Kim, 2016) due to the “temporality, sociality and place” presented in the story (Clandinin & Caine, 2013, p. 173). A model is also presented to understand the socialization structure of community building that appeared through the participants’ narratives and connected to the themes presented.

### **Researcher Reflexivity**

While engaged in narrative research, the knowing, or personal knowledge, of the investigator is of equal importance with those of the participants (Clandinin, 2013). The following description of my journey to this research is included here (Kim, 2016).

My recent arrival to this study and its dialogue of Latina/o/x identity and college unions is rooted in my relationships with them through the past five years. My first job within college unions was as a *temporary* (summer contract) student web designer assistant at the University Student Union (USU) on my undergraduate college campus, which became the first example of what they were as an environment. I was on the brink of my fifth year as a college student and had reached a critical point in my academic studies that I no longer felt prepared or impassioned about. Up until that time, my engagement outside of class was limited, as I worked two jobs to support myself in school and had only understood the USU as a place to occasionally pick-up free food and

supplies. I knew that it had recently opened a recreation and veterans resource center and that events would occasionally pop up as something to do between classes. This dramatically shifted as I became a permanent student worker there. Working there, I found myself gaining confidence in my abilities within a place where I felt seen, validated, and integrated into a community for the first time in my years of school experiences.

Further, the community of friends and mentors at the college union is what helped me to see value in my experiences, perspectives, and individual strengths. In the two and half years I spent at the union, my academic journey took on a new direction. I became actively involved in volunteer roles, engaged in conference attendance, switched majors, and plotted a course to remain indefinitely in student affairs work so that I could find a way to stay in college unions.

While I had considered a master's degree, I had hoped to stay in my home state of California and move into direct employment at a college. This reality changed when I accepted to attend my current institution (at the time of this writing) with an employment offer to work in a cultural library focused on Japanese identity. I moved over 1,500 miles from the only place I had ever known to pursue what had become my new dream, to build a successful career in college unions as a student affairs professional. This idea has since been challenged in ways that only relocation can provide. First, my identity took on new meanings and dimensions that I had not readily experienced in my life in California. Second, I found cultural identity, place within latinidad, and the limited availability of communities challenging due to shifts in environments and spaces. This was in part, the

change that came because I worked in a Japanese library, which required me to be an agent of intercultural learning in a space with a predominant culture other than my own. Third, college unions, as a phenomenon shifted and broadened through relational experiences both inside and outside of them. At the USU, I always felt like a distinct insider to the functions of the space as an employee. Then I became an outsider because the Japanese library was situated in a large multicultural center attached to one of two college unions at the university. Insider status was then renewed as I participated in a summer internship with the Association of College Unions International (ACUI). All of this to recount that, the college union of my undergraduate institution is very dear and personal to my story, and central to steps I have taken since in building a career in student affairs. However, my concept of the student union has shifted as I have traversed through a variety of physical locations and experiences that affected my perceptions of how identity, values, the environment, and social interactions shape communities for people in minoritized identity groups of higher education.

Thus, the research puzzle at the heart of this thesis began when I sat at a corner desk of a second-floor office to work on a website. Since that time, my personal experiences have since continued to layer and provided the foundation for exploring this research. Two dimensions of my identity that go beyond the frame of college unions are left to address. One is my status as a Xicana woman, who I first discovered in the Chicano/a courses I took as an undergraduate. It was the first time I understood why my perception of self felt as if it rested on the fringes of both racial/ethnic identity as a person of Mexican/Spanish/Indigenous descent but also in academic spaces. That is, as a

child I had wondered why it felt so weird to suddenly be a brown face amongst paler ones as my parents placed us in a school far from our home to ensure we received a quality education. I understood the manicured lawns, large houses and nice parks were not the places I knew as home – but I had not developed an understanding of why I never felt like good grades, honor roles and high recognition did not feel intended for me through elementary, junior high, high school and finally college. I explore Latina/o/x identity through insider affiliation within latinidad but also shaped by educational experiences and acceptance to understand that it is rooted in deeply personal experience.

Second, a consideration of why the choice of narratives. During my school transition mentioned above, I coped with the change in my lived realities by escaping through novels and reading. I seemed to have a good ability to read and remember words when I was young, and paired with a depth of reading capability garnered some academic distinction in English comprehension. This was probably my saving grace for attending college, as I had remained lackluster in other subjects though I was capable. The love of stories has never quite faded. Though, I feel my writing skills have since suffered throughout the college experience, and reading was more for work than pleasure. As a child, reading allowed me to live in many different times and places, to feel and experience the characters in contrast to my own. The arrival and journey through narrative inquiry takes cues from this past, but in many ways, it has also deeply challenged me.

Indeed, as Clandinin(2013) described the moving in the midst of stories – I often found myself struggling during this research with the shifting landscape of finding

meaning within the narratives provided by the participants that none of my prior experiences with stories and literature seemed to have prepared me for. When I thought I had emerged from the fog with ideas about what the stories were telling me, they seemed to shift again. At times, this felt like it was my inexperience, an internal fear of inferiority in academics and as a new researcher; as the reasons for the frustrations in creating this work. I also felt myself moving in and out of my voice as a Xicana, battling with descriptions of research in its terminology and writing that felt foreign to me, inauthentic and disjointed from who I was. Indeed, I worried that in exploring what I had grown to love and care for in college unions, would reject me because I have been shifting their narratives and the image they had created for themselves. It was Gloria Anzaldua (1987) who first described the experience of being in the borderlands. To me, this research represents another extension of that concept. The blending of inside and outside status within persons, places, communities, and ideas shared and contrasted through the stories of the participants and my responsibility to them as a researcher in care of these narratives.

While my story has helped determine the choices taken in the formulation and execution of this research, it is to the participants who provided the stories composited into the characters of the narrative story included in Chapter 4. At times, this process was uncomfortable because it reminded me of the pain I had felt, blocked out and forgotten, in various experiences within academic spaces. This was not anticipated in the undertaking of this research. Indeed, I saw how my story related to elements of theirs, and I strongly questioned if I could present a way of understanding that showed the

agency of the individuals in their lives. In learning the ways of academic structures and cultures of higher education, I have struggled to ensure the narrative does not affirm that Latina/o/x people are powerless. Most importantly, the living stories of the participants in this have changed my understanding of latinidad and college unions. In sharing this work, I hope it opens new considerations as others begin to move alongside the shared stories of the participants and myself; and inspires the collective change that underlies narrative research (Chase, 2000).

### **Ethical and Quality Concerns of Research**

Several concerns in the undertaking of narrative research regarding the ethical principles and reasoning necessary at all steps of the research process must be examined to show the goodness of this research (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Jones, Torres, & Arminio, 2006). The concept of “relational ethics” considers how the relationships built within narrative inquiry co-construct meaning (Clandinin, 2013; Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Therefore, various steps to ensure ethical handling of the narratives in this research are presented in the following description.

The basic layer of informed consent, accomplished with IRB approval, was provided to and completed by all participants at the beginning of this study. Semi-structured interviews were conducted in a direct person to person format outside of public spaces (coffee shops, outside venues) to minimize potential distractions (Jones, Torres, & Arminio, 2006). This space was critical, maintaining rapport with the interviewees and allowed privacy so that the conversation could shift to wherever needed based on the participant’s stories (Clandinin, 2013).

Transparency in the handling of the data and open portions for questions to the researcher from the participant was welcomed, which resulted in some conversations about maintaining the confidentiality of the information and privacy of participant identities. After I collected data and created student/professional themes, I met with each participant. I brought two field texts for them to review as part of a member check. Member checks are a way for participants to review how the researcher has represented their stories and to provide clarifications, challenge interpretations, or provide new information. The two field texts I provided participants for member checking included full transcripts of their first two interviews and the student/professional themes I had drafted. I did this to maintain the integrity of participants' voices in the plot, setting, and identification of actions central to their stories (Clandinin, 2013).

I used the interview transcripts throughout the data analysis phase as a reference and in-depth explanation for thematic pieces highlighted throughout the various field and interim texts produced. These texts allowed for continual engagement with the living data set to establish long term connection and full meanings within interpretation (Jones, Torres, & Arminio, 2006). A researcher journal was also maintained and used to track the development of themes and researcher reflections (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). As the primary researcher in this case – the point was not only to remain aware of the participant's narratives as distinct but also to be aware that my stories and experiences do not create or reflect bias and assumptions.

### **Limitations**



This study has a few limitations. First, the participants did not include any Latinx professionals who worked directly under the scope of college unions (e.g., building manager, event, and activities management). Therefore, it is unclear how the results of this study could have differed with such perspectives included. Second, this study was conducted as a master's thesis; therefore, I had a limited amount of time to complete it because of the deadline to graduate. The time pressure forced me to make sense of the data and write it up in a short period of time. Although I have incorporated several steps to assure quality research, like member checking and researcher journaling, I cannot ignore that the time pressure did not allow me as much time as I would have liked to craft my re-telling of participants' stories, accompanying wisdom, and recommendations for practice that stem from them. Given more time, it is possible that I would have been able to convey additional or more nuanced messages about participants' experiences and the role of the college union.

Third, this study focused on universities in the U.S. and used a population with English speaking skills. The reason for this is because my Spanish speaking skills are limited. This topic could take on new meaning or provide an interesting contrast if conducted in international student unions, like in Mexico, but would require fluent Spanish speaking skills.

Further, a limitation of this research is that I did not physically see the union spaces where the participants worked. This research focused on the stories participants shared about their experiences and how they made meaning of their experiences in the union. While stories alone are a good fit for the narrative inquiry method, I wonder what

was missed in not conducting an examination of the union spaces themselves. I did not conduct a walkthrough or visual analysis of the union spaces participants described, but that could be helpful to record additional data, deduce further meaning, and prompt more dialogue with the participants. Lastly, the results are constricted by the method of academic writing. Conveying stories through this writing does not convey the same meaning as participants expressed in real time. These additional points may benefit the research, and so are presented here for consideration and possible future research.

## **Conclusion**

Covered in this chapter are the methods of research and quality assurances taken to conduct this study. I described the narrative inquiry method, the interview protocol, and the data analysis approach. To ensure the quality of the research, I used participant member-checking and researcher journaling. Limitations are also presented. Lastly, researcher reflexivity is presented to identify the researchers' background with the topic and positionality in relation to participants.

## **Chapter 4**

### **Findings**

As explained in Chapter 3, two semi-structured interviews were conducted with participants to understand how Latinx student affairs professionals experience the college environment and specifically their perceptions of the college union as a space and supportive resource. A theme sheet categorizing student and professional experiences was generated from the transcriptions. Both sets of field texts were reviewed and open to addition or correction from the participants. Themes were generated by review and frequency of the most common situations, actions, and places. These were placed into the composite narrative. This data-driven story was constructed to tell about participants' experiences in college, specifically related to the college union and its role in their experiences. Throughout the story, words and phrases in Spanish are followed by an English translation. In addition, the story uses some direct quotes and paraphrased quotes from the participants. Following the composite narrative, themes from the narrative are highlighted.

#### **Composite Narrative**

The students' voices were bouncing off the walls of the atrium as they excitedly packed their things and rushed out of class. One said, "I can't wait to go that big music festival! My mom is flying out me and my best friend – you won't believe how much we spent on our outfits!"

Another student described, "A huge party will be going down next weekend at the pledge house and maybe hitting up the lake next week – am I going to see you their bro?"

A different student imagined his own upcoming events, “I can’t wait to get home and bring all my laundry up. Nothing beats getting free meals and free cleaning for the week. We’re having a party for my big sister’s birthday and everyone is going to be in town!”

Next week was break, and while usually the class hummed tepidly along as the professor walked through such concepts as corporate ventures, economic feasibility and peak revenue functions – today was different as the energy of a break loomed on the horizon.

Abejundio was distracted too – but not in the same ways as everyone else. He had clocked out somewhere between the mention of “third world country” and “immigrant labor as a cheap economic input” during today’s lecture and had flicked open Snapchat instead. Flipping randomly through the meme channels and the latest challenge videos uploaded by people he would never meet, he stopped to read up on some news headlines as they popped up in a square on the screen. A national march had started in response to rising regulations on Latinx communities, ICE raids into impoverished neighborhoods and intra-city violence pitting different *razas* (races) against each other in various news outlets. With a couple of quick taps, he sent the headlines to his friend Lucero, swiping out of the app just as quickly.

He didn’t want to think too much about that right now, deftly flicking onto Instagram instead. He also didn’t want to listen to the whispers in class of plans that he didn’t have. Between class and work and being far from home without the easy financial

means to go back – he couldn't have those plans like everyone else. *Menos* (less) money to spend on going out anywhere that didn't directly relate to school.

“It would be cool to go to that music festival though, my favorite artist is going to be headlining there,” he thought as he slipped his laptop and notebooks into his bag. The reality of these things didn't bother him too much, in part because he decided not to focus on what he couldn't do. His mind drifted off into his memories, reminding him about what it was like when he first arrived on campus.

He thought to himself about how he knew he was going to have to figure out a way to make it. That without support he wasn't going to graduate. His parents and family supported him the whole way to college – even if they couldn't be the base of knowledge or the financial means for him once got to college. He had so many emotions at the time-- feeling scared, and excited and not as prepared but knowing that hey, at least he's in college. College was just the start of an opportunity many of his friends and family didn't have. Failure wasn't an option, as he knew he was going to graduate, though it was not clear to him how exactly that would happen when he got to college. Sometimes he was really confused about the whole system and what he could do to succeed, so coming in he knew he needed to find some kind of support, a community that would help him to navigate it all.

His phone buzzed with a new Snap message from Luz, drawing him back into the present. “Yeah man, I saw the headlines already – my parents back home. They're worried. Are you going to talk with Brava soon about our ideas?”

Walking along, he typed back - “Yeah, I’m heading over now. I’ll fill you in on the response at our club meeting later.” Sending the message, he heard a ruffle in the trees and looked up to see a squirrel amongst the branches.

He returned to his thoughts as he made his way to the student union. Sometimes, certain things did bother him. Like in class when topics about Latino identity came around that caused everyone to look to him for answers. Or when people he didn’t even know approached him and asked what it was like to be there because of affirmative action. It was as if he was suddenly an expert on the subject because of the color of his skin, what he believed in, what he ate and what his family looked like – parts of his *latinidad* that signaled something to the world around him. It produced a weight of feeling that caused him to question, that maybe he didn’t belong here. In those moments he stood out uncomfortably, a lump forming in his throat, searching for *los palabras* (the words) to say. Who else could support him, who else could understand what it was like when you were expecting to find the college open to opportunities, like it said on the flyers and postcards, but living through something else?

He was close to the college union, noticing the steady flow of students coming in and out of its doors. Sitting in chairs and tables visible from the window – the school mascot emblazoned on the side wall and accents of the school colors in the trim. Stepping up to the big double doors, he pulled open the handle and walked inside. Once again, student voices were bouncing off the walls and filling the space, blending into the audible atmosphere.

There were so many situations and emotions that had occurred since those first days. Even now, he remembered the first time he was in the student union – it was so overwhelming. It was so big and had all these services. So many people...it was hard to see himself in the crowd of faces and the university branding covering every nook and cranny of the place. It still was like that sometimes. He first came here with some friends he met in a first-year transition program that was held here. At the time, it was just a place to study or grab something to eat – but it didn't mean anything to him then. It was just a place on campus that he went.

The sound of chairs sliding across the floor and the steady rumble of voices passed over Abe as he made his way towards the food court, packed with students and staff alike grabbing something to eat. Groups of people clustered around tables and chairs, chatting about break plans or their roommates or that test they just took. For a moment he paused, unsure if he should pick up something to eat before his club meeting. He decided against it, not quite feeling the usual fast food options or the price tag that came with it. The food court was a big part of the union and all, but it wasn't a great place to find affinity because it was usually pretty loud and there often wasn't many people you knew there. Walking on, he let the crowds and noise slip away behind him.

The earliest place he remembered feeling comfortable on the campus was the ethnic studies department. He wasn't even an ethnic studies major, but he was looking for somewhere on campus that had other people who looked like him, that could at least feel a little bit like home. They had some computers for students to use, so he was able to do homework in there and form a relationship with some of the professors – he was

searching for someone who could understand. By spending time there, Abejundio had met Lucero and other members of the club they started at the student union. Some of the students who joined them didn't share Latinx identity but valued the opportunity to be involved and formed friendships over shared educational goals and cultural affirmation.

He walked through corridors, past offices and up the stairs and elevators. He stepped into the student organization hub, where others were already engaged in the spot – some in group meetings rooms, others working on homework. Of those who looked up, Abejundio exchanged nods with them. All the students here knew each other as they shared a common space. The student organization hub was a unique meeting ground of some of the most highly involved students on campus. The environment here was different as the students could create unique spaces for the groups they were involved with. He slid into the chair at their club's designated desk spot and sighed a breath of relief. Being in that space, amongst others who were motivated to graduate meant the world to him. When he was struggling to get through classes other students there suggested places he could go for help and they asked about him when he was gone. He had seen some those people come and go, not just those who had graduated but also those who transferred or left school altogether. But he had come to rely on those who stayed. They motivated each other to make it through college, sharing of their successes but also their failures. He leaned back in the chair, closed his eyes as his fingers ran through his hair, feeling some of the tension from class he was carrying ease off.

He sat in the seat for a while, looking at the club's space. As the president and founder, it wasn't so much the joy of seeing office supplies-- the folders that held their



sign-up sheets and information, pens and meeting notes-- that made him feel good. The space meant something to him because of the people and the experiences he had had there. He glanced over the crafts and posters from previous events. His favorite piece was a club mural the executive board made – “*dime con quién andas y te diré quién eres*” (tell me who you walk with and I’ll tell you who you are). It was the club’s informal motto and the reasoning behind they’re club, especially as Abejundio and his friends had advocated for the start of their new student organization to have equal share in the landscape of campus orgs. A decision that was not favored by the historically prominent Latinx affiliate student organization on campus.

On his campus, some of the predominant Latinx groups had kind of coasted for a bit, didn't really need to do anything, and were still receiving funding from the university for the minimal programming that they did. But really, it was a social club for student leaders and they weren't doing outreach. They weren't engaging other students on campus, and Abejundio never quite felt welcomed in that group. To him, they were just chilling and doing enough to maintain a presence. When he remembered what it was like coming into the student organization office and meeting that group, feeling lost and looking for community, and seeing the ways they chose to maintain exclusivity, he decided that wasn’t going to be his M.O. When he talked it over with Lucero, they agreed that they wanted to have an impact on the student experience and ensure they had a positive one as well. They shook things up with the creation of their Latinx affiliated student organization.

For a second though, the sinking feeling in the pit of his stomach reemerge remembering what that situation had felt like. When he finally had found a community on campus where he thought he could fit in – he wasn't quite the "right" Latinx and found more barriers instead of acceptance. Those communities already had a spot in the university – they had funding and space and social capital as they were already integrated into the idea of the university. He squared up his shoulders head and stood up.

At the time it was hard to navigate that situation, but it resolved with their group petitioning the university to actually give them space. And it required the university to re-examine how it dedicated space because they had giving it to groups that had existed as legacy groups. However, they weren't recertifying that those groups were meeting any standards for engagement or active in the college community. At least now, their club was making progress and had more of a presence on campus.

In its own way, the club members could have a little piece of home in that space. They saw themselves in the work they did, they built friendships and were able to engage other students with what it meant to be apart of the tapestry of latinidad. Sometimes, Abejundio thought, it was like he could take the mask off. The one he used to blend in on the college campus that didn't feel like it could accept who he fully was. Sometimes that mask changed, he could be parts of himself in some spaces and changing the mask again to fit in others. Sitting there, it was the closest to who he felt inside, shedding the stereotypes and assumptions that didn't speak to who he really was. The space here mattered to him, because he felt connected to it as a represented a small spark of who he

was. Taking a moment, he came back slowly to reality, thankful for the guidance Brava contributed to making the club space a reality.

Brava was a staff member at the union, but to Abejundio they were a constant presence and mentor who helped him advocate for his needs and for those of the student org he led. Brava had a lot of other jobs too, working in and around their office or in the club space, meeting with students and doing some other type of work for the building. Abejundio wasn't quite sure of all the roles they filled, but he knew he could come to them about any questions about campus, not just those about the club. Walking out into the hall, he went around to their office, past other centers and services he never felt or wanted to use. Was it a fear of being seen in there? Or was it the fear of never seeing others like him inside those spaces that stopped him from using them? he thought briefly. He knew they were there now, not like when he first came to the union. But he felt comfortable talking to Brava and knew they would understand. Not like that academic advisor he never saw any more after they told him to just study more the last time he needed help. As he neared the office, the soft sounds of home, family, and *tradición* (tradition) meandered out into the hall. Music. He had first heard those sounds when he had decided to start the club and it helped him feel comfortable enough to walk in and ask what the procedure was for that and explain his reasoning for it.

Knocking softly, he saw Brava look up from their work, two eyes over the top of the screen as light bounced off the walls and illuminated their office, a mix of art, certificates, and photos of the places they had been. It had always been a vibrant spot, and sometimes he wondered about all the places he would be able to go to one day. Beyond

the university, he had had few opportunities to go somewhere else and experience different cities and cultures. “Hey Abe! How are you doing today?” they said as he motioned if he could come in and was signaled by a yes nod in response.

Brava was in the middle of writing up a new report on the recent space they had added for Multicultural Greek representation in one of the student lounges, a joint effort with a mutual colleague, Alvin, in an adjacent office in the union. It was a special project spurred by the inputs of students involved in those groups, with Alvin and Brava undertaking the administrative tasks to get those suggestions implemented. It took some time to get the powers on campus to agree to the creation of such a space, though they reminded the council that the university had invested years of infrastructure into the traditional Greek row on campus and of the students who had asked for further representation for all groups in the college union. Sometimes, being the champion behind the scenes meant making calls that weren’t always favored or considered a priority. The report was a way to enforce the reasoning behind it and evaluate how much it did add to the college union environment in a way that had value for administration.

“I’m ok, did you see the news today about the marches?” piped Abejundio.

“Yeah, yeah. It’s tough out there. But there are people advocating for what they need and that’s what is important, right?”

A thought flashed by in Brava’s mind “Yeah, just like how you are writing this report.”

“I came by to see you because, well, with everything that has been going on. The club wants to do something. Nobody is talking about it on campus and it’s important! I

know we have '*Noche de Cultura*' (Night of Culture) coming up and that'll be pretty big. But we weren't sure if we should try to stage a protest instead..." He trailed off as he sank into the chair opposite Brava at the desk, who had moved away from the computer. Brava exhaled and stopped slightly, the voice in their mind picking back up with their internal thoughts. They considered their emerging thoughts, "Protest? Well...I can't discourage him – though a protest isn't something any institution necessarily wants to be connected with today. There's university policies and..." They paused the thought, returning to the conversation.

"So, you want to raise awareness about the issue, right? Has the club explored all ideas and mutually decided on something?" Brava prompted. Brava had worked with students for some time, but when issues personal to students began to crop up, what little spaces the students had to see themselves or to engage with the academic lives did not fill the void of feeling those issues as invisible on the college campus.

Abejundio answered, "We are going to talk about it this afternoon at our club meeting. It's just, we wanted to ask you – like, just in case, maybe we do, or." He paused, looking down at the desk with a sigh. He thought to himself, "We just want to feel like you're going to support us." The club always had trusted Brava. But was it safe to be who they were in the larger campus environment and to speak out about this issue he wondered?

Brava saw his hesitation. They remembered the first time Abejundio had come into their office, quiet and reserved, talking about how soon new clubs could get started. As he assumed the presidency, filled out paperwork and organized students involved with

their group, Brava had gotten to know him better beyond the standard academic questions like major and class standing. Rather, over time they had asked what he liked to do in his free time, what home was like and what his dreams were for the future. A bright, sensitive and intelligent student had emerged – he cared deeply about where he was going, where he was from and many of his fellow students through diverse identity and advocacy. He had so much potential inside him and Brava was inspired by the possibilities he had in his future.

“We just aren’t sure if the campus will accept us if we do.” He said aloud. “Will this even make an impact on the campus community if we do it? Sometimes, it just feels like we’re doing stuff and things aren’t changing as quickly as we hoped it would. We’re still just seen as a minority here.” His eyes lifted away from the conversation for a moment, and no immediate answer came from Brava.

“I’m there with you.” Brava said after a moment. “I will do the best I can in order to influence some folks. Your voice is the most powerful, and you’re building. You’re building your legacy. So, what you’re doing now is not necessarily going to impact you. But it’ll impact the students who are coming in. The first-year students, and ten years down the road and fifteen years down the road.”

Coming back to focus, Abejundio smiled slightly. He wasn’t quite sure the club was really doing all that, but Brava always had a resilience and affirming spirit that made him feel comfortable but also challenged him when it came to cultivating a place that felt like home in the college campus.

For a moment, Brava contemplated what the university would be like without Abejundio on campus. They were happy to think of all the things he had accomplished and contributed to the university. The students before him helped make it possible, like Sandra, who after transferring told Brava that having the union was a special place to find community that hadn't existed on their previous campus – though it wasn't obvious or easy. Nafula and Carver, twins, who had served on the student government board and advocated for a specialized budget allocated for diversity and inclusion events. Bishop, Rayen, Iris, all students who had since graduated. Sustaining momentum on specific causes or transferring leadership during the short time they had as students on the campus was difficult though. Once they graduated, it took time for new students to get comfortable enough spaces and with themselves to feel like leadership on campus was something they could do. By then, priorities had once again shifted, staff that had partnered with students may have since left – and each student was re-learning what the previous campus leaders had gone through while adapting new goals. It was something Brava had begun questioning on how to address – but with their current workload and the continuous cycle of responsibilities, it remained mostly an internal thought they mused over.

“Have you thought about creating a proposal and bringing it before student government at their next meeting? I know you didn't decide to run this year, but you can still be involved.”

Abejundio frowned slightly. “I would have done it with Lucero from the club, Luz would have been great at it! It's just, you know, trying to resolve their DACA status

with everything that's been going on. And with the stipend and needing proper documentation to be in student government, it just left them out. It's not fair they say it's for everyone – but they can't even allow Luz to be on the board without all the forms and stuff. Plus, they're all the same anyway. The last time we asked for a little more budget for our event, they said no because they felt we already had done enough Latinx events here between us and the other club. Sure, this wouldn't be about advocating for more budget, but we don't like being told stuff like we've met some quota on diverse events on campus and they put their interests in other things, ya know? We want to include everyone; this isn't just a Latinx thing. It's a humanity thing.”

The words stung as they settled into Brava's conscious. They had talked to student government asking what could be done for Lucero. They had been met with the standard “That's just not how things work around here, and there isn't a policy that allows for that. We're sorry” response. It was something both Alvin and Brava were hoping to address soon, but again they often needed to attend to their assigned duties first. With policies like that, that had “worked” for so long, it often took a while to organize a review board, write and accept drafts and pass them into a reinstated policy. If rushed, the result would be “well-intentioned harm” if professionals did not adequately consider and utilize information about diverse groups on campus, generating light or improperly focused alternatives. On the surface, students like Abejundio just couldn't see the conversations happening behind the scenes or how those changes were occurring.

“I get that and it's something administration said they would look at. Meanwhile, I think you should at least bring the idea to your club meeting today and get some input.



Whatever you decide to do as a community, you know I will help you to execute here in the student union.”

Abejundio thought it over for a while. “Yeah, sure. I mean. Together we often can think of something pretty good. We want to get other students involved and not be afraid that we’re some threatening group you know? What the news says about us – doesn’t talk about all the ways *latinidad* manifests. We’re not a monolith and we have so much to share and connect with other groups! And as long as you help us out, we know it’ll happen.” He smiled for a moment, looking at Brava’s prized art piece on the wall, a cross-stich from their family. “Plus,” he said standing up and pointing to the piece, his brain firing off with new ideas for the club meeting “it’s like how you always say! ‘Querer es poder’ (will is the way) See you later then,” he said as waved himself out of the chair and towards the door.

“That’s right. Querer es poder! Take those leadership skills and make it happen!” Brava called as he left. As the sound of his footsteps went down the hall, Brava looked back at the report they were working on. There is a lot more things they could be working on right now, but this was the priority. They read it over: numbers of student traffic, identifying the intended outcomes and budget compared to the current cost of upkeep as well as projections for future maintenance and possible additions. At the end, quotes from a survey of students that read:

“It’s cool to see people of color in Greek on campus...I never thought that was an option for me.”

“I might not be in Greek, but I like the colors, flags and pieces the clubs are incorporating into the space. It reminds me of my family back home. It’s my new favorite space in the union.”

“Can we get more art and names in the union that reflect us? The new multicultural Greek wall made me think, how cool would it be to represent the diversity of campus with something students could make! Maybe at a union event or some other big community project.”

Their voices were the reason the space was made. Space mattered to students, and they were looking for ways to see themselves in the college environment. The college union was somewhere that this could happen, but it required cultural sensitivity and resonance previously not seen or needed within the limited demographics that had existed on most college campuses for the better half of their existence. Without students of color to question why and how things existed a certain way, the college union couldn’t be aware of the changes it could make. But how can they tap into those students now and listen? Brava wondered. At the end of the report, they entered in a new line break and entered the following:

As the living room of the campus, we need to remain cognizant and aware of the input from all our students – and consider the responsive changes we can make based on sustaining and growing from their voices. We can’t limit ourselves to student demographic numbers or their generated events limited by quotas. The college union has the unique potential to influence the environment through implicit and explicit messaging based on who is present in our buildings, whose

influence and input are utilized, visible investments in long-term unique cultural representations beyond single events or historical months, to identify cultural deficits in our services and programming and to craft a union that allows our students to engage with the university community and see the value in their personal experiences and contributions to the campus as members.

Brava sighed. “Querer es poder. Querer es poder.” It had gotten them through high school, their bachelor’s and their master’s degree. It was passed on to students who visited them, like Abejundio and Lucero. They were the leaders of tomorrow, the inspiration for why they were in this field. Some days it wasn’t always easy, but they reminded Brava about the time their mentor saw their potential, validated who they were as a person as well as what skills they had to contribute to the community, and helped them to achieve their dreams. The setting sun cast a warm glow over the office, and they turned with renewed energy to finish their report.

Back in the student organization hub, Abejundio and other club members were starting their meeting. “Well, what did Brava say? Should we do a protest?” Luz asked. They had just got done talking through the latest updates about the marches, and a mixture of anger, sadness and tenseness hung in the air. It was different then what Abejundio felt in class earlier that day as students rushed on with their break plans.

“Naw, you know – they suggested we discuss our options. Maybe we do or we don’t. But they said they would help us either way.” The group looked skeptical.

“Hey – we can do this! It matters y’all. Querer es poder!” He smiled and the mood lifted amongst the group. Taking a white board marker in hand he waved over the group and said “So, I was thinking, what if we?...”

### **Themes**

A variety of themes were present throughout the participants' narratives that led to the creation of a data-driven composite narrative. As a reminder, these themes were present in the data map described in Chapter 3, and topics that were the most consistent across all participants were incorporated into the narrative. Through narrative smoothing, the most dominant phrases and situations emerged as primary themes used to illustrate how the participants experienced the college union as well as how experiences outside the union affected those perceptions. The themes presented in the following sections highlight their function within the story.

**Seeking community in the college environment.** Abejundio actively sought out community on his campus in a way that would feel safe and supportive of his academic goals. Revealed during reflections from his time as a new student entering college, he possessed an awareness of how his previous experiences affected how prepared he would be able to complete his degree. This knowledge includes a recognition that there were gaps in what he knew about college, resulting in a mix of emotions. He expresses a tenacity and drive to succeed, based on his familial support and values.

As Abejundio becomes familiar to the reader, an understanding of the broader college environment is also expressed. In it, there are lines of detachment – Abejundio does not share the same care-free tones and excitement of what is being said by peers

around him. Though not fully revealed, he reflects that his priorities are different and that his access and ability to do certain activities is not of the same focus that is being openly shared by others. The presence of one friend, Lucero, emerges – who connects with Abejundio over concern about news from outside the college. Further, through Abejundio's additional memories, he shares the feeling that he cannot easily connect with peers, as well as situations had occurred on campus that enforced the sense of an *othering effect*. As he had spent time on campus, he expressed a feeling that college as a form of endless beneficial opportunities is not the case. In seeking community, Abejundio forms interpersonal relationships amongst fellow peers in social groups, as well as looking to faculty and staff and mentors to navigate the college environment.

***Emerging social groups as early support and familiarization with the campus.***

Throughout the story, the reader is introduced to pieces of Abejundio's journey through the college environment. An early influence he notes a transition program that allowed him to form some connections. However, the program did not provide resources specific to his Latinx identity or of other minoritized identities, as he displays an active search for a type of community that could understand him. Prompted by a desire to find someplace that felt like home, he sought out groups or spaces on campus that could reflect some parts of who he was. Before being involved in the union, Abejundio recalls going to the ethnic studies department and through time spent there becoming part of an intercultural group of students. He states that this group shared a common goal of wanting to be successful, but also affirming. Even amongst a group of students from an assumed subset of racial/ethnic backgrounds, they shared the sense that the ethnic studies department was

one of few places that felt affirming. This alludes to the fact that culturally affirming areas are not always salient or available on the campus. He forms a long-standing friendship with Lucero based involvement with this social group.

***Culturally aware mentors as guides to navigating college environments.*** In the story, Abejundio described the importance of mentors as he navigated his undergraduate institution. Initially, when he reflects on being a new student, he considers finding anyone who could help him navigate and persist through the institution. For instance, Abejundio recalls having access to an academic advisor on the campus, who is a central figure possessing knowledge about academics and college. However, this relationship is not used or cultivated anymore because he says that the advisor did not understand who he was. As the sense of being *other* emerges in connection with his time on campus, he places high importance on those who could understand or be sensitive to his experiences, culture, and needs. His earliest mentors exist in the ethnic studies department, as those who had connections and knowledge of different cultures, or who showed cultural similarity or sensitivity beyond a dominant perspective. During his journey to find a mentor, the union was not seen as a primary location to find culturally supportive mentors, nor was it regarded as a place to engage with their cultural identities. At the present of Abejundio's journey, however, Brava is shown as being an influential mentor whose insight in how to navigate the college union environment is highly valued. The reality of this mentoring relationship is revealed in the following themes.

**The college union as a meeting place or a meaning place.** In the story, Abejundio generally recalls the union as a place he could go with his friends, but it did

not hold significance to him. Instead, it functions mostly as a meeting place for students to gather, talk about their plans for the break, study, and eat food. However, three themes contribute to how the union existed on campus and how it became more conscious to Abejundio.

*Opportunities for engagement.* The institution, as well as faculty mentors, do not hold clear messages supporting or actively promoting the college union. This is reflective of Abejundio's earliest memories, where he feels overwhelmed by the space and unsure of its many services. Through his social connections, he becomes more familiar with the area based on what the union *physically* was, like places to eat and study. He may have understood *philosophical* values, but only through initial experiences in the space. There does not appear to be much programming that serves to draw him in, primarily as he seeks places for community building that were personally relevant to him. Without quickly seeing others like him in the space, like how it seemed at the ethnic studies department; he feels less comfortable being at the union. Not feeling comfortable and accepted in college union spaces are also the reasons why he continues to not use other services in the building despite becoming more aware of them as he navigated the area. While there is a bounty of opportunities to be engaged, they appear to be orientated to the dominant norms of the campus. The branding further enforces these social norms, reflecting the values of the students who occupy the space and lack of non-white cultural representation. For this reasoning, Abejundio chooses not to engage with these spaces. There is a clear and present need for validation in the college union environment, but there is also a sense of not wanting to enforce the *othering* that makes him feel displaced.

*Developing a relationship with college union spaces through extended*

*engagement.* Abejundio made sense of the union in part based on the types of groups occupying the physical space and its setup that he informed how he perceived his relationship with the college union over time. First, Abejundio noticed a lack of minoritized cultural identities he could connect with, such as similar peers, faculty mentors, services or programs that offered a point of connection with non-dominant identity in college union spaces. However, individual spaces within the union were different in an affirming way.

A primary place that felt safe and accepting for Abejundio in the narrative is the student organization space. Despite this, finding its location and seeking to be included within the historically affiliated Latinx clubs on campus, led to further dissonance in his sense of acceptance on campus. He recalls that the group was exclusive and non-welcoming to others, maintaining its use of resources to ensure they had a good experience – at the cost of excluding others. This could be reflective of a scarcity mindset, as a community for Latinos or other minoritized identities seem to be a rare commodity on campus. Once they had authority over something that was connected to who they were, their actions symbolically signify a desire to protect the small comfort they had in the environment. This did not deter Abejundio, who used his personal values as persistence to build a community and friend group to advocate for another club, in doing so challenging existing policies within the union. This led to the creation of an additional club space that was affirming and important based on the actions taken to gain it, served a purpose he connected with, and helped to engage others on campus in a



meaningful way. This club also led him to gain a new union mentor in Brava, whose office became a second critical space of assurance and comfort.

Spaces like the student organization hub and Brava's office garnered more importance and meaning over time. He repeatedly engaged in these spaces he felt them become comfortable and supportive, though he had early reservations of not being accepted. Because of these things, he spent time there and looked to people in those spaces when questions or difficulties arose throughout college or when he needed additional support.

***Developing knowledge of culturally sensitive zones in college unions.***

Abejundio and his fellow peers crafted their own culturally sensitive space in the union through their organization. And, they wanted to extend that awareness outside of the small student organization space more broadly across the institution. As he became involved, he formed a connection with Brava, who became a mentor to the group and helped them to navigate the internal composition of the union.

Brava, the professional staff member, was more mindful of how the history and culture of higher education made changes sometimes tricky and a long process. Within brief reflections from Brava, it is clear there are boundaries to being a professional staff member supportive of student needs, yet being mindful of how their positionality as an employee of the institution limits their choices of advocacy. Brava recognized the tension between Abejundio's ideals and the culture of the institution and wanted to have them better aligned, but they were aware of their limited power to align them. Brava knew they could support Abejundio and the other students but that it would be on top of their

everyday responsibilities. It would also likely be from behind the scenes by helping students strategize, understand who to talk within the union, and plan out the logistics to have a successful event.

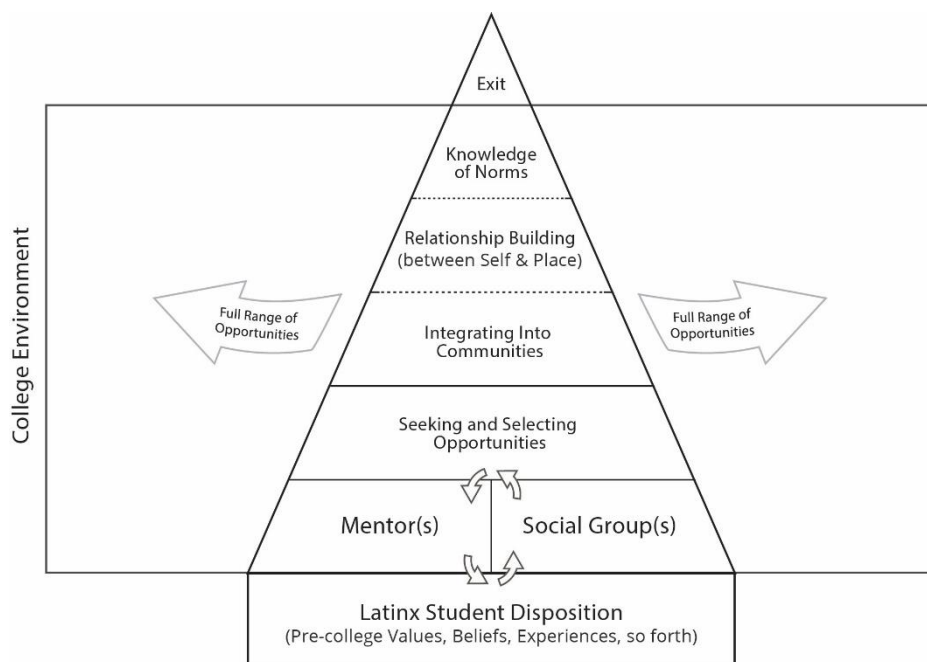
From this internal union relationship, Abejundio also gained more awareness of the *philosophical* barriers produced in the union space, beyond the initial *physical* ones he encountered. This is revealed in his dissatisfaction with student government – both because they imposed quotas on certain types of events in the union but more so by their existing rules that barred undocumented students, and therefore Lucero, from participation. These situations occurred as Abejundio sought to cultivate a sense of community on campus, noticing these endeavors ran counter-active to the norms, policies, and institutional values of the college and the union. This is apparent in his care of taking the clubs concerns to the broader campus. While the club holds some stake in the union as a student organization, there is still caution in how messages that run counter to the norms of the college are taken — hence contributing to the apprehension of advocating for something important to them.

While Abejundio would one day leave the institution (graduation), he will take this knowledge, of integrating into communities, making meaning and system norms, with him. Brava, however, would remain, hoping to create more systemic change. In their work, Brava also actively acknowledged a high desire to work from student-led initiatives. Together, Abejundio, his fellow students, and Brava represent a segment of individuals who are seeking strategic ways in which to enrich the environment of their college union to be more welcoming for minoritized students. However, they are limited

in their efforts in different ways. Abejundio lacks the presence and status behind the scenes to enforce change amongst the higher administration, and his place on campus is restrained by the literal timing (likely four or more years) of his undergraduate career. Brava, as an agent in the relationship, is limited by timing and types of students who seek to engage in the union space, and whose input is needed to advocate for culturally sensitive change.

### **Modeling Latinx student socialization of community building.**

Through each part of the primary and sub-themes, it is apparent that there is a process of socialization that informs how community building occurs on college campuses for Latinx students. In particular, many of these elements build upon and inform each other. Based on the ways that participants explained these areas in their lives, the following model was developed to visualize how these components work together.



**Figure 1. Latinx Student Socialization of Community Building (Rodriguez, 2019)**

In this model, students' dispositions exert a significant influence on how they can go about navigating the college environment. These outlooks form a base of understanding from which they gain additional insight and influence from the cyclical relationships of social groups and mentors, leading to specific opportunities for engagement. By selecting opportunities, they are afforded choices to integrate into communities, and therefore create a sense of meaning around their relationship of shared *physical* and *philosophical* orientations. Lastly, they begin to become more aware and knowledgeable of norms on campus, and how they can influence or counter those in their goal to persist to graduation (exiting the college environment). The barriers between the process of integrating into communities, relationship building with spaces and knowledge of norms were permeable, in that the participants consciously moved in and out of each

of these zones at various times in their stories. By graduation, students have formed clearer perspectives of the campus environment, based on the processes and opportunities they participated in up until graduation. This includes being able to articulate the mixing of physical and philosophical processes at work in the environment. Layered throughout these experiences is the need for cultural relevance and responsiveness found in the CECE model (Museus, 2014). That is, a student does not choose any mentor but likely a mentor who, at minimum, is culturally responsive. Their social groups could function as a place of cultural relevance – even if they did not all share identity within Latinidad. These provide the basis for them to select, and therefore pull in, their own cultural relevance and responsiveness to the type of opportunities they feel welcomed to participate in. Ultimately, this can be a transformative change through the individual's agency. It is suggested that a review of the CECE model and its elements of a culture relevance and responsiveness can be applied to various stages of the social model presented above.

It is important to note that this type of modeling does not describe students whose journeys do not expressly involve mentors or social groups, and therefore are limited in their activity on campus. While the focus of this study was to understand college unions, data generated also revealed the centrality of these dimensions in other areas on the campus. Namely, multicultural centers or racial affinity centers, which were not the focus of this research. A core reason for this was that there was not a clear consensus on the placement (attached to the union or detached in a separate part of campus) of multicultural or single cultural centers (ex. Latino house) on undergraduate and

professional campuses mentioned. Because they were not all a feature of the union, I did not choose to incorporate them into the narrative explicitly. However, participants' descriptions and use of multicultural centers fell in line with the model. That is, in seeking campus community, they became familiar with the center based on mentor and social group connections formed within them. They found these spaces to have opportunities (resources, events, physical space) that resonated with their needs. They became active community members, and so these centers became significant as they generated meaning around it through an extended relationship over time. Through this mapping, I was able to visualize a system that applied to their college union experiences, but outside of them as well.

This chapter explored the experiences of the participants. I used a composite story to convey the participants' experiences seeking community, creating community, and developing relationships with mentors inside the outside the college union. These themes are then connected in a process demonstrating how participants developed community. The next chapter, Chapter 5, situates these findings within the existing literature and offers recommendations for practice and future research.

## Chapter 5

### Discussion

This chapter will focus on the connections of this study to the literature, implications, and recommendations. The primary research question that drove this inquiry was to understand how Latinx student affairs professionals experiences in the college environment and specifically their perceptions of the college union as a supportive resource on campus.

### Summary of Findings

In the last chapter, a composite narrative based on themes generated for the participants' experience was presented. This story focused on the ways that the composite student Abejundio carried many layers of his identities and experiences in finding a place to connect with and cultivate a sense of community on campus. The following themes were present in the narrative.

*Table 2. Composite Story Themes*

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<b>Seeking community in the college environment</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Emerging social groups as early support and familiarization with the campus</i></li> <li>• <i>Culturally aware mentors as guides to navigating college environments</i></li> </ul>
<b>The college union as a meeting place or a meaning place</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Opportunities for engagement</i></li> <li>• <i>Developing a relationship with college union spaces through extended engagement</i></li> <li>• <i>Developing knowledge of culturally sensitive zones in college unions</i></li> </ul>

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In the story, the overarching themes of *seeking community* and *college union as a meeting or meaning place* held importance in the development of Abejundio's college experience. Like the participants, Abejundio has a strong desire and orientation to find community, and therefore find a safe place of belonging, validation, and a form of shared cultural identity. However, the process of *othering* (Krumer-Nevo & Mirit Sidi, 2012) in the social and constructed world of his institution became more visible and pervasive to Abejundio. Despite this, Abejundio demonstrates his resilience and self-efficacy – not accepting a reality where he is seen as *less empowered* but by focusing on finding those who possess the skills and knowledge to circumvent these issues on the campus. This is where social groups and mentors are critical, as they provide context to the scope and variety of culturally sensitive opportunities available on the campus.

Within the union, Abejundio reflected on which opportunities he wanted to take, which meant taking decisive action in his choice of opportunities. Based on these choices, he created an extended relationship with the union, shifting his perception of it just being a meeting place to a meaning place through extended engagement. This relationship results in a deeper understanding of the norms, policies, and rules that underly the physical environment of college unions. Using this knowledge, Abejundio can retain agency over his experience in college union spaces, with the advocacy help of someone with strategic administrative influence in the form of Brava.

### **Connections to the Literature**

In chapter two, the literature review covered the Latinx student pipeline to college, including the importance of pre-college factors, college selection, and ways of



navigating higher education environments. Also, an overview of the history and growth of college unions was presented. Based on this information generated from this research, the following connections to the literature are recapped below.

**Importance of supportive and validating groups and relationships.**

Participants in this study did present high levels of resilience (Gordon, 1996) and self-efficacy (Bandura, 1968), concepts established in the literature. Participants sought relationships with others in the form of social groups and mentors to help them navigate the campus. The groups participants joined were not necessarily Latinx, but shared similar values and goals, as well as knowledge about how to navigate campus.

**Mentors as support and guide in the college environment.** Literature supports the importance of mentor relationships (Luedke, 2017). Amongst participants, mentors were most often sought for in staff and faculty, relying on their proven experiences and knowledge of navigating processes in higher education. Most vividly, without these connections, the students would have missed valuable opportunities, some changing the course of their educational goals. These situations fit into existing research that affirms the aggregate sum of college environments are not always supportive, but small help could have long-standing impacts (Franklin, 2016; Friesen, 2018; Gloria, et al., 2016; Gloria, et al., 2005; Turner, 2015). Staff mentors in the participants' stories validated their experiences, helped them see their potential, served as role models, supported their search for resources on campus, and developed trusting relationships with them. Further, they described their mentors as coming from a variety of backgrounds and identities, affirming

that a mentor does not have to be Latinx to have an impact, as long as they are culturally sensitive and validating.

**Significance of the type and breadth of opportunities on campuses.** The variety of opportunities on campus and how they are marketed and executed are important. This study contributes perspectives of Latinx staff members about the most meaningful engagement experiences in the college union. It suggested that many more opportunities exist in the union, but now all are inviting to Latinx students. This is was predominant in the analysis of connections between the participants to the CECE model. As discussed in Chapter 2, Museus's (2014) CECE model offers nine indicators of culturally engaging campus environments. Participants sought opportunities that could provide a *humanized environment*, had staff with *proactive philosophies*, and could offer *holistic support*. These are forms of cultural responsiveness in the opportunities participants sought. When participants did not see these present, they tended to interact less with those services and events and attached less significance to those experiences. This study demonstrates the challenges students faced finding spaces where they felt wholly welcomed – reflective of the differences among Latinx experiences and also other identities like sexuality, social class, religion, and so forth. As indicated by the CECE model, culturally responsive environments contribute to the sense of belonging and produce supportive structures that assist minoritized identities in reaching successful outcomes (Museus, 2014).

**Union spaces in relation to student agency.** The CECE model also presented how meaningful connections underscore the relationship between students to the union

itself. After mapping data on the model, I found that the ideas and functions of *cultural relevance* (Museus, 2014) really resonated with participants' experiences as students. That is, they presented a depth of agency based on their understanding of the availability of *cultural familiarity, relevant knowledge, cross-cultural engagement, community service* and *validation* in their college (Museus, 2014). Agency is used here to describe the student's *cumulative capital (knowledge)*, inherent and learned from mentors and social groups they used to navigate campus. They actively used this knowledge themselves as they became sources of cultural relevance in the environment. By doing so, they filled a need to not only persist on their own but to develop further networks of support and awareness on campus with their college peers. This is a decisive decision not to limit knowledge of the university, nor indicative of a willingness to remain invisible in the broader community.

**Understanding concepts of belonging and exclusion.** Through relationships with college unions, based on the journey from initial familiarization to long term involvement, students developed a more sophisticated understanding of the environment. While students may not readily identify the nuances present in a college campus, it was apparent through the participants' stories that they were aware of how their socialization to the campus affected them based on a convergence of *social, physical, and epistemological* realms (Gonzalez, 2002). While students may not be readily able to talk about the campus environment in the ways that connected to higher education or student affairs theories and vocabulary, there was a clear awareness of understanding which places were "safe" to interact with or those that would be less welcoming. In addition,

over time – this growing sense of consciousness affected their perceptions of college unions as they became more familiar with how silent barriers exist in their spaces. These realities sensed by participants' strongly connects with the work of Harper and Hurtado (2007) whose research displayed that minoritized student identities continue to experience the campus environment in different ways than dominant majority peers. This also affirms the findings of Godfrey (2018), which revealed that students possessed dual sensitivities to the college union – both as a place that held some opportunities for community building while possessing policies, attributes and personal experiences that meant students did not always feel welcomed in the space. This was counter-active to the highly espoused values, and sense of multiple opportunities administrators felt existed (Godfrey, 2018).

### **Implications**

This study sought to understand how Latinx staff members experience college and their perceptions of the college union as a supportive space. There are implications from this study about Latinx individuals' experiences, specifically in the college union. First, space in physical environments matters for Latinx students, not merely because it exists. Beyond physical spaces simply existing, environments mattered most to the participants as they functioned as a place for long-term engagement with their identities and provided visibility of these identities in the environment (i.e., human presence, physical settings, unwritten rules, broad norms, and values). These things shaped how they related to their college unions, as well as other environments, and how or whether they were meaningful. In particular, if students saw the college union as non-culturally affirming, the

opportunity to engage latinidad in that space was never questioned, instead focusing on where they found those connections. Instead, they focused on the places where they felt their identities were engaged. This engagement led to long-term involvement and therefore reflected as a place of significant meaning for them. This represents a strong connection to student persistence theory, in that those students who were actively involved were more likely to feel connected to campus and eventually graduate (Tinto, 1998; Hurtado, 1994).

Second, mentors, as persons of color and supportive allies across campuses matter to Latinx student experiences. These students actively sought out those who could understand their experiences, and avoided staff, faculty, and even services that seemed like they would enforce a dominant discourse on their experiences. This was reflected in college unions, as they were more likely to be perceived as supportive or non-supportive by the general presence of students from a similar background, staff of color and those who are actively seen in the union space as supporting minoritized students. Further, as students and professionals, the participants described how their mentors spanned across positions, ethnic and racial affiliations, chosen because they could understand their experiences outside of a dominant perspective. These staff members play an important role in college unions and Latinx students' experiences.

Further, it presses the need for these union staff to be visible and active to students, not isolated in offices, or kept behind the scenes. Staff that are actively visible and available for student interaction positively reflect on the environment as fostering interpersonal connections. In addition, staff of color, as well as sensitive and culturally

competent allies, can provide links to students of marginalized identities, as well as inform collaborative partnerships with groups that work to support these students. This network of support includes those faculty and student groups who relay information about where to find support for Latinx students on campus.

Third, identifying barriers to redefining and expanding college union efforts to integrate and support Latinx and other minoritized identities. Regardless of espoused values and marketing brochures, the college union is a product of the whole sum of the environment it occupies as well as who occupies it. While not seeking to dismiss or override cultures at the expense of others, an environment that continues to implicitly and explicitly enforce certain norms will also continue to include exclusions. Strategic steps can be arranged to build momentum towards a more inclusive community. First, staff represents a valuable investment in college union spaces. Staff cannot hope to realize or build systems of support called for by students without more institutional support. For example, Brava was torn between focusing on her primary duties and being able to meet the needs of students. Further, if they are required to fulfill too many responsibilities by constantly battling with deficit or problematic attitudes towards minoritized students, high volumes of paperwork, and handling large caseloads of students – they are therefore highly susceptible to burn out and may leave the institution.

Lastly, evaluating the type and breadth of opportunities available for Latinx and other minoritized identity students available in the college union. This does not have to be seeking extreme changes, like recreating an entire programming structure or service, as this may not be realistic in a short time frame. It does mean that additional insight is

needed to diagnose how and in what ways the broader community discusses opportunities and services. College unions must seek the input of their constituents to revisit and build spaces that serve the whole of the community. This includes a set of recommendations in the next section. Overall, they indicated that students were increasingly challenging norms on their college campuses, but they needed support from culturally sensitive and aware staff.

### **Recommendations for Practice**

To address the multiple concerns and layers to cultivating supportive environments for Latinx identity in college unions, the following strategies are presented:

1. **Conduct a cultural audit and/or needs assessment of the college unions' spaces.** As each union is widely different, care should be taken to clearly understand what each organization can do relative to their campus. A cultural audit and/or needs assessment would provide an analysis of a college unions' employees, services, and espoused values and to create measurable variables for each. Second, conducting a physical observation and walkthrough of their spaces can reveal greater insight to understand how their current college students use their spaces, which may differ from they were conceptualized initially for use.
2. **Form partnerships with campus communities of color.** This is a critical point as students, faculty, and staff are central to the work of college unions. Identifying how these groups discuss, understand, and have opportunities for long-term and sustained engagement with unions. These groups need to be included as inputs on the space, beyond those who are already advocates by virtue of being highly

involved (e.g., student government or employees, internal union review by staff). Further, covering how these groups understand, became familiar with and why they are (or are not) continually engaged in the union space. The goal does not have to be to gather radical insights alone but also to understand their contextualized experiences that surround how the union is perceived and how it could improve.

3. **Create a vision plan based on information collected and implement cultural sensitivity/anti-bias training.** Using data gathered from steps 1 and 2, college unions can create a tailored vision plan based on the measurable aspects of what is currently in their environments. This would include identify gaps in understanding and satisfaction of unions based on demographics, create goals to shorten those gaps, establish recommendations, and consider how existing policies can become more adaptive of minority student needs. This plan can also be presented to administration, to help facilitate support of such initiatives and action. Secondly, part of this plan should include implementation of cultural sensitivity or anti-bias training, in addition to any Title IX (nine), ethics or other work training required. This suggestion is two-fold to also ensure that those staff of color already in union spaces can be met with more significant opportunities for collaboration in fostering culturally sensitive spaces. Further, to facilitate increased sense of a *humanized space* (Museus, 2014), as a staff or student employee in the space does not need to know every answer about the Latinx



experience – but to be consciously able to guide and direct to resources with inclusion skills.

4. **Track changes and consider future needs.** Using the measures created, the college union can track and analyze progress made in their tailored vision plan. However, as development can stop at any time based on internal restructuring or outside influences, they can also be used to indicate where change was hampered or more challenging to implement. One additional note is presented, in that addressing the concerns presented about college union spaces may require thinking beyond traditional ways of implementing change. For instance, creating a branded poster to represent world languages in a college union space might be seen by staff as a way to display a value of international cultures. However, it might be perceived by students as unauthentic, because it's hung somewhere with little traffic, does not serve to engage the cultures it represents, and the union does not supplement its creation with other visible actions to support inclusion of these groups. If instead, the international student organizations can help create the banner, they are allowed an opportunity to be engaged and to see a part of their identities incorporated into the union space. This action then affirms college unions as grounded in the community, functioning with student inputs as crafters of college union spaces being adapted to their needs. This is certainly not the quickest or easiest route, as it requires planning, setup, and implementation, but its benefits can be far-reaching.

There are a few caveats to this plan, as it is based on a best-case scenario.

Foremost, it requires a culture of research and assessment to be undertaken by individual college unions, not only from a broad association standpoint or individual researchers. As a result, who exactly should be tasked with such an initiative is left unclear, or if any person in the organization would have room in their work schedule to undertake such responsibilities. Smaller colleges, with limited union space and capacities, may find difficulty in setting aside time, financial, and physical resources to such an initiative. In contrast, a large university with a well-established union may encounter more avenues of approval needed and an extended length of time to implement any changes. However, it rests that college unions are a central zone of community building and so requires continual assessment of what that means as populations in colleges change over time. Without considering the impact of their environments for all members who utilize its space, and their multiple identities, college unions fall short of their goal to be a living room – not just for themselves or to meet their historical definition – but for all of those present on the campus.

### **Recommendations for Research**

While this research sought to explore how Latinx staff members experienced the college environment and their perceptions of the college union, it revealed additional areas for research consideration. As a narrative approach, the research required the revisiting of stories through memory. This is a complex subject, which raised questions about the roles of memory in student affairs experiences and how conflation may play a part in retellings. This was signaled by the revisiting of my own memories, prompted by

the participants' narratives, both positive and negative that reminded me of similar situations from the past I had blocked out or forgotten before and during my college union experiences. In addition, the research raised further interest in understanding the memories and experiences of college union leaders who have been active in the field for over 20+ years, which could provide additional interesting insights.

In addition, it may be fruitful to narratively revisit my own experiences in autoethnography, to analyze how my story as an individual in college unions can reveal additional paths for students. For instance, I realized from the participants' stories that as a student I did not hold the same drive to be highly involved (I categorically consider myself an introvert), did not know of any resources afforded to Latinx (e.g. transition programs or long term support through services like TRiO or first-generation orientated groups), and had no mentors until after the union employed me.

Since this study was about the experience of staff members while they were in college as students, I was not able to focus on how they perceived support and navigated the college environment as professional staff within it. During the interviews, they exhibited a consciousness of the exclusivity reflected in the writings of Harper and Hurtado (2007). However, they responded with insights far more strategically orientated towards producing change through the system itself. However, they expressed frustration with some of the pervasiveness of dominant perspectives on campuses, and how it could be draining for them and ethnically/racially identified staff. This also provided an undertext to interviews, in which participants shared their insights, but also did not want directly to criticize their current jobs or work environments. While none of the

participants explicitly expressed they would be penalized, the faux pas of it being revealed in their social and work realms implicated consequences for the participants if care was not taken to ensure their insights were protected. This made me wonder about the duality in which Latinx, and other staff of color, work to ensure their positions are secure and what these silent threats were. In a separate direction, mentoring networks as invisible in the system sparked interest, and how they permeate other aspects of the college environment.

Lastly, continued research into the perceptions of a variety of minoritized identities in college unions is highly encouraged. Even as someone from within the spectrum of latinidad, I gained new insights and revelations about what it means to craft and serve in affinity spaces. There may be convergences and differences for other populations, and I dearly hope these efforts will be taken up by others in the field. Further, research looking into the dynamics of ethnic/racially orientated groups, including those in-between Latinx affinity groups, would be helpful to understand more in-depth how they function in relation to each other. This suggestion is made in light of the tensions of identity experienced by the participants as students, and not feeling readily accepted or capable of integrating into certain Latinx affiliate spheres.

## **Conclusion**

Over the past century and a half, the college union idea has existed relatively well and remains firm in its stance of supporting community building. Student demographics have changed, and unions are uniquely poised to make long term investments that are flexible and adaptable to the needs of students. The answer to how students, staff, and the

broader environment can foster cultural inclusion is best left to the individual college unions themselves. This is due to the nuances of experiences in regions and types of university settings, which can work with a standard of diversity goals as a benchmark, progress must begin inward from each organization.

While rapidly growing, both Latinx identifying populations and college union historians do not appear to have had the time or benefit of looking into the complex ways in which their identities accept but also exclude. For Latinx populations, that means coming to terms with the ways that early Chicano and Puerto Riqueño movements led the way, but cannot solely support the needs of today's vast experiences of latinidad. As the term Latinx is likely to shift and merge, deconstructing the monolith myth of single identity within latinidad will likely take new precedence. For college unions, revisiting its purpose; the commitment as a center for extracurricular learning and citizenship building, while understanding how theatres, art galleries, services, and food courts do not automatically foster the intended benefits of community. These early definitions are therefore not to be considered wrong but used as a point of understanding and challenged in how they can adapt to the future of an inclusive college union for all.

The college union idea has been held and expressed by leading scholars, leaders, and influencers in its ranks since its inception. However, it appears time that the definition is given back to the populace it serves, to the students, staff and community members who benefit from the opportunity to cultivate meaningful places of interaction and dialogue in the college environment. In the history of college unions, it was students who first conceptualized and used its spaces. Foundational themes have had time to

develop into a widespread structure on college campuses internationally. Its future significance and meaning will depend on those who will embrace its context as well as its challenges. This research takes this tone - right now in unions across the globe, students are looking for a sense of community, a home away from home on college campuses. The college union has always best succeeded with student input working in tandem with well thought out and implemented rationale from staff, a significance further emphasized after this research. In seeking to retain a high level of relevance and cultural inclusivity in college union spaces; educators, union advocates, student affairs staff and others who hold influence on their structures and policies must recognize and incorporate those voices that were silent in its creation. Further, it cannot continue to fall behind in providing empirical evidence of how to improve as a concept and its roots as a community-building space. This transformative work must rely on its early focus on using the insights of the community, as no other avenues seem to highlight the way to this future.

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## Appendix A

### Informed Consent



**IRB #:**

**Participant Study Title:**

Environmental Support Factors for Latinx Students in College Unions

**Formal Study Title:**

Environmental Support Factors for Latinx Students in College Unions

**Authorized Study Personnel**

**Principal Investigator:** Naomi Rodriguez

**Secondary Investigator:** Stephanie Bondi, Ph.D.

**Key Information:**

If you agree to participate in this study, the project will involve:

- All unspecified gender individuals older than 19 years age
- Personal reflection on recent work at a university/college in a professional role in the college union or within 2 years recent active involvement (e.g. previous employment or an activity like Union Board)
- Procedures will include 2 interview sessions plus 1 debrief session to review analysis of the individual participant's narrative for authenticity of interpretation by researcher.
- 3 total meetings are required
- Each meeting will take 1 -2 hours
- There are no risks associated with this study
- You will be not be paid for your participation
- You will be provided a copy of this consent form

**Invitation**

You are invited to take part in this research study. The information in this form is meant to help you decide whether or not to participate. If you have any questions, please ask.

**Why are you being asked to be in this research study?**

You are being asked to be in this study because you are over the age of 19, identify as a Latinx/a/o or other similar identity, and have 2 years experience working directly or closely with college union activities. Priority will be given to participants with consistent involvement over a two to three-year span, versus involvement broken up over a course of time (e.g. employed temporarily for 6 months, one-year break from the university setting, then 1 year back in college employment, etc).



#### **What is the reason for doing this research study?**

College unions are a central part of the college environment, with established goals for intercultural knowledge and proficiency. Currently, there is little research that explores how minoritized populations, like Latinx, interact with the college union environment. The Latinx population was chosen for this study as they represent a statically significant demographic on college campuses who graduation rates do not match those of enrollment. This research is designed to answer (1) In what ways does the student union environment support the survival and persistence of Latinx students to degree attainment?

#### **What will be done during this research study?**

You will be asked to complete 2 interview sessions, and 1 debrief/feedback meeting. The interview sessions will ask questions related to your (1) undergraduate experience, (2) feelings of incorporation into the college environment and the college union, and (3) knowledge of programs and services targeted for Latinx students and who implements/influences these programs (4) ideas for Latinx support in college. The final meeting will be a debrief and feedback session, where interpretations and key themes found in the participants narratives will be presented. The participant will verify the authenticity of the interpretations, or clarify passages to ensure their meaning is preserved. After this meeting, the participant will have access to a digital version of the file for one one-week to review the information.

#### **How will my data be used?**

Your data will be kept in audio recordings and written transcripts only, and will not be sent to researchers outside of the University of Nebraska-Lincoln for any reason. Written transcripts and demographic information collected will be used as data. This data will be reported in a way that cannot be traced back to you by using a pseudonym and replacing identifiable parts with unidentifiable information to protect your identity. This includes any personal information that could identify you, specific places or programs. Only unidentifiable records with pseudonym usage will be shared with a peer debriefer to provide a secondary integrity check on interpretation of data. Audio files recorded during the interview sessions will only be available to the research team until destruction.

#### **What are the possible risks of being in this research study?**

This research presents minimal risks: (1) emotional and/or psychological distress because the interview questions involve sensitive questions about your undergraduate/professional experience (2) loss of confidentiality.

#### **What are the possible benefits to you?**

You will have the opportunity to reflect thoughtfully on your experiences.

#### **What are the possible benefits to other people?**

This research will provide a research-based perspective on the Latinx needs in colleges and universities, specifically college unions.

#### **What will being in this research study cost you?**



There is no cost to you to be in this research study.

**Will you be compensated for being in this research study?**

You will not be compensated for your participation in this study.

**What should you do if you have a problem during this research study?**

Your welfare is the major concern of every member of the research team. If you have a problem as a direct result of being in this study, you should immediately contact one of the people listed at the beginning of this consent form.

**How will information about you be protected?**

Reasonable steps will be taken to protect your privacy and the confidentiality of your study data.

The data will be stored electronically through a secure server and will only be seen by the research team during the study. Individual identifiable records will be deleted after May 2019. Unidentifiable data will be kept until December 2019.

The only persons who will have access to your research records are the study personnel, the Institutional Review Board (IRB), and any other person, agency, or sponsor as required by law. The information from this study may be published in scientific journals or presented at scientific meetings but the data will be reported as group or summarized data and your identity will be kept strictly confidential.

**What are your rights as a research subject?**

You may ask any questions concerning this research and have those questions answered before agreeing to participate in or during the study.

For study related questions, please contact the investigators listed at the beginning of this form.

For questions concerning your rights or complaints about the research contact the Institutional Review Board (IRB):



**Opportunity to provide feedback on research participant process:**

The University of Nebraska-Lincoln wants to know about your research experience. This 14 question, multiple-choice survey is anonymous. This survey should be completed after your participation in this research. Please complete this optional online survey at:



**What will happen if you decide not to be in this research study or decide to stop participating once you start?**



You can decide not to be in this research study, or you can stop being in this research study (“withdraw”) at any time before, during, or after the research begins for any reason. Deciding not to be in this research study or deciding to withdraw will not affect your relationship with the investigator or with the University of Nebraska-Lincoln.

You will not lose any benefits to which you are entitled.

**Documentation of informed consent**

You are voluntarily making a decision whether or not to be in this research study. Your verbal consent means that (1) you have read and understood this consent form, (2) you have had the consent form explained to you, (3) you have had your questions answered and (4) you have decided to be in the research study. You will be given a copy of this consent form to keep.



## Appendix B

### General Recruitment Letter

Hello,

My name is Naomi Rodriguez and I am currently a Master's student at the University of Nebraska – Lincoln. I am conducting a research project (IRB# 2019118819 EP) and am looking for participants that meet the following criteria:

- Identify as Latinx/a/o or other variation/title
- Minimum age of 19 years old (no maximum age)
- Current professional in higher education, student affairs focus
- Minimum 2 years experience working closely with or directly under student unions (a.k.a student centers, student unions, etc).

This study will explore the environmental support factors for Latinx within and around college unions, via the reflections of the undergraduate and professional experiences of participants. If you are interested in participating, please email: [nrodriguez7@unl.edu](mailto:nrodriguez7@unl.edu).

If you know someone who would qualify for this study, please forward this message and promotional flyer along. Thank you for your time.

Thank you,

Naomi R.

## Appendix C

### Online Forum Recruitment Text

Hello,  
My name is Naomi Rodriguez and I am currently a Master's student at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. I am conducting a research project (IRB# 2019118819 EP) and am looking for participants that meet the following criteria:

Identify as Latinx/a/o or other variation, Minimum age of 19 years old (no maximum age), Current professional in higher education within the field of student affairs, Minimum 2 years' experience working closely with or directly under student unions (a.k.a student centers, student unions, etc.).

This study will explore the environmental support factors for Latina/o/x within and around college unions, via the reflections of the undergraduate and professional experiences of participants. If you are interested in participating, please email the primary researcher directly at: [nrodriguez7@unl.edu](mailto:nrodriguez7@unl.edu). Please do not use comment section on this post to ensure anonymity of information or personalities in case of selection for this study. You will be provided with additional information via email including time requirements of this study and for consideration for potential participation after contacting the email address above.

If you know someone who would qualify for this study, please forward this message and promotional flyer along directly via personal email. Again, do not comment any persons below to ensure the anonymity of potential participants. Thank you for your time!

## Appendix D

### Recruitment Poster



RESEARCH PARTICIPANT  
OPPORTUNITY

**Identify as Latinx/a/o?**  
**Do you work heavily with or in a college union?**  
**Are you in a professional higher education role with 2 years recent experience with college union activities?**

Volunteer to share your experiences as part of a master's level research project! Minimum age to participate is 19. Any gender, location, socioeconomic status, with English speaking skills

Interested and available for up to three virtual meetings?  
Contact: [nrodriguez7@unl.edu](mailto:nrodriguez7@unl.edu)

 IRB# 20190118819 EP  
Date Approved: 01/15/2019  
Valid Until: 01/14/2020



## Appendix E

### Email Inquiry Response

Hello (Name),

Thank you for your interest in participating in my research study. Your potential participation is greatly appreciated!

(If the person had specific questions, I can address them here. )

For the purpose of acceptance in this research, please provide the following:

- Brief history of work within or connected with college unions (does not need to be more than 1 paragraph long, please provide approximate dates)
- 3 Meetings times available in your schedule within the next 2 months of this correspondence
- Preference of email or voice call communication for reminders about meetings
  - If by phone, please include phone number
- Preference of a video chat or phone call for meetings
  - If by phone, please include phone number

If you know of someone who qualifies for this study, please forward my email address and the attached letter and promotional graphic to them.

Thank you,

Naomi R.

## Appendix F

### First Interview Session Reminder Email

Hello (Name),

Thank you for sending the appropriate documentation to be considered for this study and to have been accepted as a research participant.

This email is to let you know that your first meeting is on (Weekday, Month, ##) at ##:## (time zone) (a.m./p.m.). In addition, you elected to have meetings via (video chat/phone call) via the following (email/phone number).

If you can no longer make this meeting, please send an alternate time available up to one week later than the date listed above.

Attached is the informed consent document we will review during our first meeting. In addition, a copy of the interview questions we will cover during the two interviews is attached for preliminary viewing.

Thank you,

Naomi Rodriguez

## Appendix G

### Reminder Email for Appointment

Hello (Name),

This email is to let you know that your first meeting is on (Weekday, Month, ##) at ##:## (time zone) (a.m./p.m.). In addition, you elected to have meetings via (video chat/phone call) via the following (email/phone number).

If you can no longer make this meeting, please send an alternate time available up to one week later than the date listed above.

Thank you,

Naomi R.

## Appendix H

### Final Notice Email

Hello (Name),

This will be the final reminder for participation in the research study I am conducting. If you are still able to participate please ensure you send the following items to me within one-week of this email receipt.

(if demographic questionnaire request:

- Brief history of work within or connected with college unions (does not need to be more than 1 paragraph long, please provide approximate dates)
- 3 Meetings times available in your schedule within the next 2 months of this correspondence
- Preference of email or voice call communication for reminders about meetings
  - If by phone, please include phone number
- Preference of a video chat or phone call for meetings
  - If by phone, please include phone number)

(If other needed information, like appointment reschedule directions, include details here)

Thank you again for your interest. Your withdrawal of interest to participate does not hinder any current or future relationships with the researcher or with the University of Nebraska – Lincoln.

If you know someone who is available and qualified for this study, please send them my email address: nrodriguez7@unl.edu and the attached recruitment letter and promotional poster.

Kindest Regards,

Naomi R.

## Appendix J

### Interview Protocol

#### Interview Protocol

##### **Introduction**

To review, my name is Naomi Rodriguez, conducting this research project as part of the thesis requirement of the Educational Administration program at the University of Nebraska – Lincoln. I'm here to learn about the experiences of individuals who identify as Latinx/a/o, and how the college union as a fixture of the higher education environment supports their journey towards degree attainment. The purpose of this interview is to learn how you as a current Latinx, higher education professional made sense of their undergraduate experience through the context of the environment and how college unions played a part in those experiences, with the addition of professional insight. There are no right or wrong answers, or desirable or undesirable answers. I would like you to feel comfortable saying what you really think and how you really feel.

- Review informed consent

To protect your identity, this research will utilize a pseudonym as a reference to your narrative experiences.

- Would you prefer to pick a pseudonym or have one randomly assigned to you?

If it's okay with you, I will be audio-recording our conversation since it is hard for me to write down everything while simultaneously carrying an attentive conversation with you. Everything you say will remain confidential, meaning that only myself and the secondary researcher will have access to this information without encoding. Encoding meaning that specific names such as yours, institution, college union or location will have been removed.



- Do I have permission to start recording now?

Thank you. I will ask you a series of questions now concerning your experiences. Let me know if you would like the questions repeated or take some time to think of your answer.

#### **Interview Questions**

- How do you remember yourself as a student?
- Thinking back, what was your earliest memory of entering your undergraduate college campus?
  - When did you become familiar with the college union and what was the impression it made on you? How would you describe the college union space?
- In your undergraduate experience, is there a prominent moment or memory where you found yourself relying on personal cultural knowledge or values that motivated you to continue?
  - For example, un dicho, un persona muy importante, arte or musica?
- When you needed help during your academic journey, where did you go and who did you turn to?
  - What did this/these place(s) provide for you and how did it feel navigating that time and situation?
  - Was there a time you felt culturally excluded, or as a part of the la otra/ the other, in the higher education environment?
- As an undergraduate, how and when you would interact with the college union?
  - What did you feel the union provided for you as student?
  - What did you feel the college union lacked and could not provide?

- Tell me about a time you felt connected to the college union:
  - What was present that allowed you to feel valued in the college union space?
  - In that moment, did you feel authentically yourself while in that moment environment, or did you feel you were only using a single part of yourself to feel included?
- In what ways, if any, was your self-identity as a Latinx person salient in those moments?
  - Do you feel this perspective has developed since then?
- Are there people who showed knowledge about Latinx people, countries, values (on your undergraduate or current college campus)?
  - Who were those people and where were they located?
  - In what spaces did you interact or meet with them?
- Drawing from your undergraduate and professional experiences, please describe any spaces or services are marketed in a way that Latinx students are familiar with them.
- How would you describe how key leaders communicate about needs of students?
  - Does this reflect how these individuals make decisions based on information from people who know students best?
- How would you describe the ways in which the union communicates with outside campus organizations to advance the work of the union as well as the campus?
- Is there a dream or goal you would like to implement to support Latinx students?
  - Are there any barriers to accomplishing these goals? (financial, organizational, etc)